

**HOME, HYBRIDITY AND LOVE: DIASPORIC RELOCATIONS  
IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *HELL-HEAVEN***

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**Abstract**

*"Hell-Heaven" is the second story of the collection Unaccustomed Earth. It is the record of the growing up experiences of the narrator, Usha, who is the second generation Bengali migrant in the United States. Jhumpa Lahiri makes an external focalization on Pranab, who visits the narrator's house frequently and follows closely the different stages of development in Pranab's assimilation. The story reveals distinct stages of Pranab's diasporic existence in the United States. In the first stage, like any other subject in Diaspora, he is homesick and wants to leave the United States. In the second phase of his development, he rejects his Bengali ethnicity so completely to get married to Deborah, a White American girl. In the third phase, after fifteen years of his marriage, he tries to get back to his cultural roots and gets into a nostalgic mode. These phases are similar to what R. Radhakrishnan explains in the contexts of ethnicity and Diaspora. R. Radhakrishnan argues that a subject in Diaspora undergoes drastic changes in his/her affiliation to the cultures of the motherland and the host nation, proving a journey from high degree of ethnicity and low assimilation to a high degree of assimilation and low ethnicity, and finally to a romanticized emotional reinvestment in one's ethnicity and homeland.*

**Keywords:** *non-accommodative, disciplinarian, detached, migrant, cultural hybridity, translocate, journey, mobility, sojourn, homelessness.*

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**-DR. ANIL S. SUGATE**

"Hell- Heaven," as the title suggests, indicates the cases of differences. The hyphen between 'Hell' and 'Heaven' is not a connector but a marker of contrast. Hell and heaven for the narrator, her mother and Pranab are different locations. For the growing up narrator, her disciplinarian mother and her litany of prohibitions make the hell while the freedom and grace exhibited by Deborah is heaven. As she finds her mother non-accommodative, she finds the entire Bengali culture oppressive. Like a typical second generation migrant her affinity is more towards the culture of the host nation. For the narrator's mother, who is the first generation migrant, the house of her loveless husband, and by extension, the host nation, is the hell. Pranab, who visits their family and shares her interests in music and Bengali culture, converts her house in heaven, though for a brief period. In the context of Usha's mother, Jhumpa Lahiri gets back to her favorite idea that home or heaven in a host nation is made by meaningful relations rather than one's geographical locations. For Pranab, another first generation migrant, the United States with its detached professional people, is the hell. Later, he finds his heaven in the company of the narrator's mother, and still later with Deborah. Further, "Hell- Heaven" is also an indicator of the sharp contrast in characters and also the turns that people take in their life. The narrator, her mother and Pranab change drastically over a period of time bringing out the hell-heaven polarities in them.

Like many other stories of Jhumpa Lahiri, "Hell- Heaven" is abundant with references to places and landmarks indicating journey, mobility, sojourn and migration – the preoccupations of Diaspora subjects. The story begins with references to Calcutta, Massachusetts Avenue, Harvard Cook and

Harvard Yard. This part of the narrative indicates a narrative subjectivity so distinct of a migrant who wants to signpost his/her memory with the significant places of the host nation. This interest in locations and space overlaps with an urge for cultural hybridity. This is distinctly revealed in the nature of the narrator's mother. She is not only interested, like any other middle class Bengali, in discounted house wares but also to hold on to the ethnic markers of Bengali culture. The narrator's point of view captures these visible signs of her inner conflict between ethnic identity and hybridity:

The answer to his question was clear, given that my mother was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women, and a common Tangail sari, and had a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair, and the full round face and large dark eyes that are so typical of Bengali women. (Lahiri: 2008: 61)

The narrator, Usha, too is a symbol of hybridity. Her childhood memories are laden with the images of places and locations. She remembers that she was born in Berlin and later translocated to the United States. She recalls her childhood with vivid markers of places: "Central Square is the first place I can recall living, and in my memories of our apartment, in a dark brown shingled house on Ashburton Place, Pranab Kaku is always there." (Lahiri: 2008: 61)

Pranab, on the other hand, experiences more cultural dislocations than the narrator. For the narrator, the dislocation is more spatial as she is the second generation migrant whereas for Pranab, shifting his location from Calcutta to MIT in the United States is more of a cultural displacement. His early life in MIT, with a series of cultural shocks, makes him feel that he is in an unaccustomed earth. The narrator focuses on the uncertain cultural identity of Pranab, of his early days in the United States:

Life as a graduate student in Boston was a cruel shock, and in his first month he lost nearly twenty pounds. He had arrived in January, in the middle of a snowstorm, and at the end of a week he had packed his bags and gone to Logan, prepared to abandon

the opportunity he'd worked toward all his life, only to change his mind at the last minute. (Lahiri: 2008: 62)

Pranab tries to counter these cultural shocks and homesickness by trying to get attached to a Bengali family. He gets close to the narrator's mother, with whom she shares interest in poetry, music, food and politics. These aspects of life provide him the cultural contact and also the feeling of home in his state of homelessness.

Reciprocating Pranab's interest in Bengali culture, the narrator's mother feels comfortable in his presence. Pranab becomes a compensation for her detached husband. Further, she shares nostalgia for North Calcutta with Pranab. The narrator observes:

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 jelabis and moghlai parathas. (Lahiri: 2008: 64)

Hindi songs, in particular, become a point of cultural and emotional contact between Pranab and the narrator's mother. They try to recreate an emotional picture of their homeland by discussing nostalgically Hindi Films and songs:

Within a few weeks, Pranab Kaku had brought his reel-to-reel over to over apartment, and played for my mother medley after medley of songs from the Hindi films of their youth. They were cheerful songs of courtship, which transformed the quiet life in our apartment and transported my mother back to the world she'd left behind in order to marry my father. She and Pranab Kaku would try to recall which scene in which movie the songs were from, who the actors were and what they were wearing. My mother would describe Raj Kapoor and Nargis singing under Umbrellas in the rain, or Dev Anand strumming a guitar on the

beach in Goa. (Lahiri: 2008: 65)

The first sign of Pranab's growing comfort in the alien land is seen in the act of buying a car. It indicates the migrant subject's curiosity to explore the international space. Further, it also indicates mobility as it is one of the significant tropes of journey used in the story. Pranab takes the narrator and her mother frequently in his car. This provides the narrator and her mother a chance to navigate through the landmarks of Boston. These trips make the narrator's mother feel more at home in the United States. The narrator describes:

In the summer, Pranab Kaku bought a navy-blue Volkswagen Beetle and began to take my mother and me for drives through Boston and Cambridge, and soon outside the city, flying down the highway. He would take us to India Tea and spices in Watertown, and one time he drove all the way to New Hampshire to look at the mountains. As the weather grew hotter, we started going, once or twice a week, to Walden Pond. (Lahiri: 2008: 66)

The mutual heaven created by Pranab and the narrator's mother is toppled when Pranab falls in love with Deborah and introduces her to the narrator's family. This development in Pranab marks another contact of cultures and also an eventual hybridization. The narrator who is still a girl feels like addressing Pranab's fiancé as 'Deborah Kakima'. This indicates her urge to appropriate, through hybridization, a Western individual and her identity. Meanwhile, Deborah learns a few Bengali terms like 'Khub bhalo' 'accha'. These terms clearly mark her efforts to bridge the cultural gap between herself and Pranab. She also learns to eat certain foods with her fingers instead of with a fork. Here, language and food become the sites the zones of cultural contacts and hybridity.

The narrator, who is the second generation migrant, feels closer to Deborah than to her mother. She accepts Deborah readily while her mother hates her, partly due to her jealousy and partly due to her cultural bias. Usha,

however, admires Deborah for her freedom, dress sense and her honesty. She feels very comfortable in Deborah's presence and she makes a platform for an easy exchange of ideas. Her interest in Deborah is the message in the story – the creation of a multicultural international space that marks tolerance, acceptance and cultural exchange. The narrator's subjectivity clearly indicates her growing admiration for Deborah and the culture that she later represents:

I expressed myself more easily than Bengali, which I was required to speak at home. Sometimes she asked me how to say this or that in Bengali; once she asked me what *asobbho* meant. I hesitated, then told her it was what my mother called me if I had done something extremely naughty, and Deborah's face clouded. (Lahiri: 2008: 69-70)

However, the narrator's mother has a different view of Pranab's affair. She states that their marriage will not last. This view is shared by Pranab's parents too, who are in Calcutta. They believe that only an Indian girl can make Pranab feel at home. But, Pranab rejects their view and gets married to Deborah. This marks a clear stage in his development as a Diaspora subject – a complete disengagement with his ethnic past and a strong urge to assimilate. Though Pranab becomes more Americanized, he tries to maintain hybridity as a strategy to straddle two cultures that he represents. When Deborah gives birth to twin girls, they are named Srabani and Sabitri though they are called Bonny and Sara. These girls, with their twin names, indicate bi-cultural condition of the children born out of mixed marriages. However, these different names also indicate the cultural strategy that the parents invent for their children to provide them a higher degree of assimilation.

Usha's mother, who feels now homeless without Pranab comes to hate Deborah and the culture that she represents. She becomes more intolerant towards the American Whites and gets closer to the traditional Bengali families in Boston. At home, she starts regulating the mobility and the dressing sense of Usha. She forces Usha to wear Salwar-kamiz and warns her of the consequences of affairs and casual sex. However, Usha decides to be

more like Deborah and starts wearing Western outfits and attending school parties. She also decides to shape her identity like that of Deborah and fancies having relationship with White boys. At this stage Usha and her mother make real 'hell-heaven' in the story – a pair of sharply contrasted characters that also represent two different cultural blocks.

Pranab, after 15 years of his married life with Deborah gradually gets back to Bengali families. He develops an affair with another married Bengali woman and gets separated from Deborah. His life in the United States comes to a full circle, making three different homes with different women. Further, it also reveals his journey from ethnic identity to hybridity and to the eventual return of his Bengali roots. This journey also suggests that a diasporic identity is dynamic and it is constantly reshaped with every single situation in the host nation and with every single relation that the subject gets into. A similar journey can be traced in the case of the narrator, too. From a homely Bengali girl, she changes to rebellious adolescent who invents her identity through high degree of revolt, hybridity and sexuality. Food appears a significant metaphor of culture in this story. It becomes one of the spatial markers of culture, bringing the Diaspora subjects together. There are many descriptions of lunch, dinner and party. In these gatherings around the tables, Bengali meals, American drinks, Turkey and pie appear. They indicate the gradual change in the culinary taste of the subjects in Diaspora.

The story has a fitting conclusion, which to some degree, resolves the cultural and psychological problems of the subjects in Diaspora. The concluding part clearly indicates the mutual acceptance of Usha and her mother. Usha understands, with a matured perspective, her mother's need for Pranab's company in the past as she knows that he was trying to create a home in her mother's location in Diaspora. Usha's mother accepts Usha not just as her daughter but as a child of America as well. This mutual acceptance seems to be the compromise formula for the subjects who represent two generations in Diaspora, building a viable inter-generational bridge between 'hell' and 'heaven' of cultural gaps.

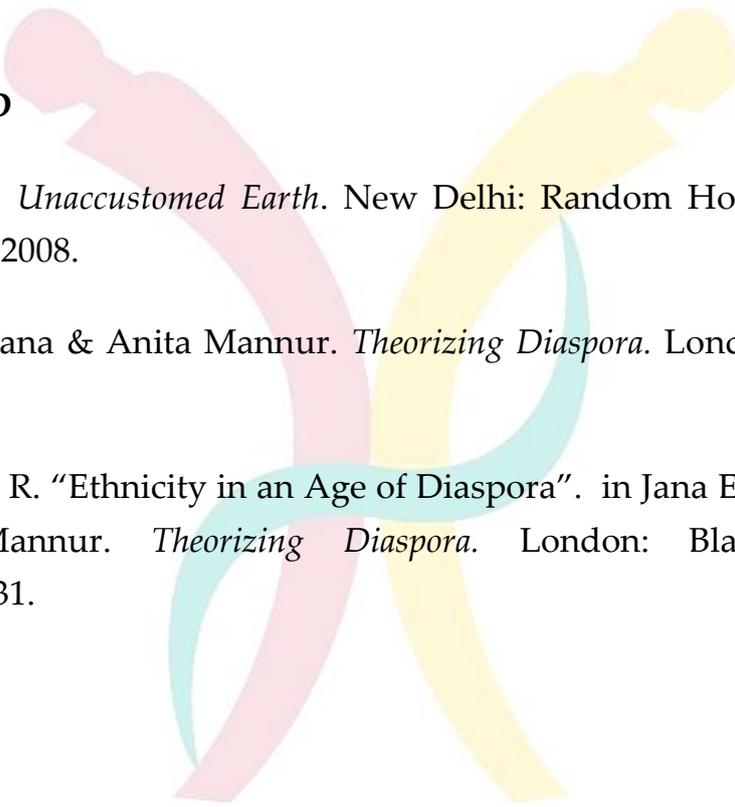
“Hell- Heaven,” thus, is a story that deals with love, jealousy, desertion, loneliness, depression and heart-break in the setting of an international space. If one takes the narrator’s mother and Deborah as two women who represent two different cultures with Pranab as a link between them, one can easily realize that both women, regardless of their cultural and racial differences, feel equally insecure and homeless in the absence of true love.

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