

**THE EXPLORATION OF THE HOMOGENOUS FAMILY IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S  
SHORT STORY *HELL HEAVEN***

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**Dr. T. Devaki,**

Assistant Professor of English, Yadava College (Autonomous), Govindarajan Campus,  
Thiruppalai, Madurai – 625 014,  
Email:devakithulasiram@gmail.com

**Dr. C. Raju,**

Associate Professor, and Head, Department of English, Yadava College (Autonomous),  
Govindarajan Campus, Thiruppalai,  
Madurai – 625 014,  
Email:rajoou@gmail.com

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, an American author with an Indian background, lays bare her creative talent in cross-cultural interactions. The narration centers on the association and dissociation of Immigrants to the values of the adopted culture. It is narrated by Usha, from the younger point of view amplifying the process of hybridization of values. The title “Hell-Heaven” brings up the picture of two places of abode, the former absolutely detested and the latter mostly preferred. The paper deals with the conflicts of Aparna, the mother, who is clinging on to her Bengali identity, strongly and her daughter immersing into the values of America.

Keywords: *the homogenous, heterogeneous, process of hybridization*

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Jhumpa Lahiri, an American author with an Indian background, lays bare her creative talent in cross-cultural interactions. She has emerged as a celebrated writer of multiculturalism at par with Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Uma Parameswaran, and et al. Being a second generation migrant, she handles the dilemma of immigrants effortlessly and presents its ever-changing scenario. One of her short-story collections, *Unaccustomed Earth* dominates with the theme of the widening of the gap between generations of settlers. They are prone to be binary opposites in their multicultural aspects, resulting in giving up their past and their roots.

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abode, the former absolutely detested and the latter mostly preferred. Jhumpa Lahiri has carefully chosen this title to picture the immigrant state of affairs. Diasporic writers generally deal with these options, either to cling on to their ethnic identity or to assimilate in the adopted culture. The impasse of in-between causes traumatic loss and poor sense of belonging and the individuals voluntarily choose their hell or heaven

They have lived in Berlin and Massachusetts for nearly a decade but still, Aparna is not familiar with her neighbor and inexorably stays indoors expecting her husband and Usha to return home. She complains of how lonely she feels there and how she hates her life in the alien country.

Pranab Chakraborty is a new-comer who stands for the other side of dissociated association with the new country. He becomes a part of Usha's family, calls her father Shyamal Da and her mother Boudi, and sets in the role of the younger brother. Usha addresses him, Pranab Kaku. He is an engineering student at MIT and is very critical about the new customs. He confesses that his life turns hell in the adopted country: "Life as a graduate student in Boston was a cruel shock, and in his first month he lost nearly twenty pounds. He was stunned that my [Usha] second-grade teacher didn't assign any homework and that at the age of seven I hadn't yet been taught square roots or the concept of pi."(63)

Pranab spends most of his time at Usha's house as he considers them his extended family. He relishes the Bengali food, music and related talks about his hometown. He brings back vibrant colors in their life in the alien soil, "washed up on the barren shores of my parents' social life in the early seventies."(60) His visit is always looked forward and there is always the fourth chair in their house for him.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Pranab is a unique characterization who is at the crossroads of transition. He is the most promising student who has come to MIT with an impressive assistantship, but he is "cavalier about his classes, skipping them with frequency."(63) The gradual accommodation with the new country, with his Bengali acquaintances at the backdrop, disturbs his focus in life. He smokes frequently and he is ready to give up all his hard work. His slouched lanky body and untamed body make him look like "the American hippies who were everywhere in those days... . Though he was a scientist by training, there was nothing rigid or predictable or orderly about him."(62-3) Whenever he comes home he always announces his starvation and eats ravenously. He buys a costly camera and Volkswagen Beetle and enjoys long drives.

Pranab meets Deborah, a native of America, in the "fall of 1974,"(67), a season ironically specified for Pranab's fall for Americanization. Deborah accomplices to Pranab's way of life and enjoys being in the company of Bengalis. While Aparna considers it a temporary attraction

that would be shattered, “In a few weeks, the fun will be over and she’ll leave him” (69), both of them get accepted to each other’s way of life. Deborah learns to speak Bengali and eats with her fingers. She even addresses Usha’s parents as the way Pranab would do. Aparna could not make out this union and considers it impossible: “‘It’s just hell-heaven, the difference,’ she would say, always using the English words for her self-concocted, backward metaphor.”(68-9) Without the approval of his parents, Pranab married Deborah and disappear from their life. Pranab moves into Boston, a part of the country which the narrator’s parents consider unsafe.

The Bengali ethnic circle considers Deborah as a witch who has stolen Pranab of his origin, and their mixed marriage as “a doomed enterprise.”(75) In his Thanksgiving party, he is all nostalgic for his Boudi’s hospitality which gives him the strength to behold in the new country. It is a symbolic announcement that any immigrant takes his native culture as his stronghold to assimilate in the new sky. His roots have given him strong nourishments as he declares that it unites him with Deborah and his happy family with twin girls. But his own weakness and his lanky attitude bring astray in his in-between way of life. The basis his sudden dissociation from his country and his parents may also have been the foundation of his association with the new.

When all the initial excitements of the country are over, he gets divorced from Deborah and trails back with another Bengali woman. His absence in the photographs, with only Deborah and their twin girls, found in their house can make one understand how only in the outward appearance he adopted the new life and he is not a part of his new family. It also shows us how he has failed to find a balance in his life and destroyed two families. He proved loyal neither to his parents nor to his wife. Ironically he has resisted all the efforts of Deborah to reunite with his Bengali ties and reconcile with his parents.

The family gain material benefit but still does not lay its heart in the alien soil. They still hesitate and stand aloof from being mixed with their present life. They are afraid and are always conscious that one day they would return back to their own home, till then whatever materialism they hoard they are always tenants of the adopted land.

While quoting Jhumpa Lahiri as an interpreter of emotional pain and affliction, Rashmi Gaur observes the outstanding characterization as follows:

She boldly and brilliantly maps the shores of her protagonists' inner worlds, often blurring the lines between the concepts of optimism and pessimism, constantly underlying the fact that questions on which meaningful happiness of life depends can be tackled in two ways – intellectually and existentially. (139)

Both Pranab and Aparna lose their stability while the former's approach to the adopted land lacks emotional well-being and the later vehemently grips on to her musty-fusty existence. They live superficial life poles opposite and it leads them to self-destruction. Finally, they revise their roles, Pranab feeling void of life without his grounds of cultural hold goes back to his native culture and Aparna feeling bitter in her constrictive approach slowly spreads her wings towards self-contentment. The author does not propose readymade solutions but insists on her staunch belief that if a seed is planted and replanted in the same worn-out soil it will not get enough sustenance. Whereas, as she quotes from Nathaniel Hawthorn in the epigraph, she establishes that in multiple enriched soils where its roots strike through the unaccustomed earth it nourishes itself with manifold supplies.

Usha, the narrator, is the post generation of this tight holding of the past, origin and native culture. She always looks up at Deborah who compliments her progress and in a way feels attracted to her ways. But in a gradual process, it has become quite common for Usha, in her teens, to merge into the environment that surrounds her. Compared to her, Pranab's twin girls have a very little identity of Indianness. They never speak Bengali and are raised with different standards of life:

They were not taken to Calcutta every summer, they did not have parents who were clinging to another way of life and exhorting their children to do the same. Because of Deborah, they were exempt from all that, and for this reason, I [Usha] envied them.  
(75)

Unlike her mother, Usha cannot escape its pull. She goes to parties, drinks beer and mingles with boys and enjoys all those freedom that the new country has provided her, but keeps it a secret from her parents. She isolates her mother, screams at her sending a clear message that "I had stopped needing her, definitively and abruptly, just as Pranab Kaku had." (77) By associating her with Pranab's heels, the author clearly indicates the changing mindset of the second generation that feeds on the past and craves to extend its territory broad beyond the limits in the vast new sky.

Usha makes peace amendments with her mother and makes her understand that "I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well." (81-2) A new relationship blossoms between the mother and the daughter and they confess each other's heartbreaks and help each other to overcome their shortcomings. Shweta Awasthi regards it as follows:

Lahiri skillfully handles the narration from a child's point of view to probing into the immigrant's sensibilities. The child belonging to the second generation of immigrants is in a

better position to bridge the gap between the cultural differences of the two worlds – Indian and American. (153)

It clearly indicates Aparna along with the readers that there is no looking back for Usha's age band. With the help of Usha, she competes into the process of acculturating to the American world and thereby regales her family with high spirits. The author clearly highlights how a transformed vision towards the new country is the prerequisite of the multicultural homes that seek a home away from home.

Aparna politely undergoes this understanding of her daughter getting nourishment through various fertile soils and enrich her as a multicultural product of the world. Her new trait helps Aparna also to make out new ventures. Instead of being idle and complaining about what she has left back, she too is ready to get a degree in library science at the age of fifty. This conclusion of Jhumpa Lahiri provides us a new light on the impact of the new over the old, the present over the past. As Sunita Sinha presents, Jhumpa Lahiri is bestowed with the rare gift "combined her authentic familiarity with the lives of the Indian Diaspora and her gift for inhabiting the space of her characters while describing the most mundane experiences, thus making the readers identify with the characters." (186)

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