

Intercultural Competence In Lahiri's 'Hell Heaven'

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Abstract

With the advent of globalization, concepts like diaspora, displacement, identity have become prominent topic of discussion. In search of identity, diasporas make compromises, negotiations. The present paper intends to explore the concept of identity and cultural hybridity in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. An eminent Indo-American writer, Lahiri herself is a child of immigration and multiculturalism which enables her to portray the characters both in the light of native and alien culture. Her works project realities of human existence in a beautiful manner. In spite of being in a constant struggle of confusing identity, and dilemma between two worlds, the protagonists of her story strive towards a happier world full of zeal and zest. The story under analysis is 'Hell-Heaven'. The analysis reveals that Lahiri is a master playwright who depicts the lives of diasporas in an intricate manner.

Introduction

Under the influences of globalization, now-a-days it is quite common that the participants meet new and unfamiliar elements in their familiar context or even coming across new communicative contexts where the participants do not share but construct meanings is also not something unexpected. Under such circumstances, the normal behavior of a person may be interpreted differently by the other person and the participants may find it challenging to

make each other understand their mutual concerns in the right spirit or transparently. Such communicative contexts full of uncertainties are quite common at the present time and it is difficult for the interactants to assume what the expected social norms under the given situation are or whether a person's normal behavior will be accepted and acknowledged by the other person as polite and natural. So people involved in the dynamic ebb and flow of interpersonal relationships, often confront issues of uncertainty and conflict.

Jhumpa Lahiri has said, "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are who grow up in two worlds simultaneously". Due to the displacement, Diaspora's quest for identity, a sense of inability to belong becomes all the more difficult and desperate. Diaspora's sense of loss becomes tragic when they think of returning to their homeland. The homes to which they want to return undergoes complete transformation and turns out to be a romantic illusion. An immigrant longs for the world left behind in his native land but does not manage to belong to neither world. When he sees a new place, he sees some connection to the old place, forever searching for his old home in his new home. His loyalty, affection, culture are all a mix bag of old and new and always in an indeterminate state. He lives a double life- his life outside his house; he tries, without quite succeeding, to belong to the new world, while his life inside his new home, he strives to replicate his old home, without much success either.

For analysis, the paper takes up 'Hell-Heaven' where one can find protagonists undergoing constant fear of lost identity, alienation, loneliness. However, the most prominent thing one can find in the stories are that the protagonists are always in an acceptance mode. Though they are caught between two worlds, caught between constant dilemma, they nurture an openness towards their fellow-beings.

Data Analysis

The story 'Hell-Heaven' undertakes a mother-daughter relationship between Aparna and Usha, that sustains and resumes its strength and vigor after much struggles, and squabbles in their day to day life. As narrated by the daughter, Usha, the readers find Aparna, the mother, longing for zest of life and solidarity, harmony in her own surroundings. Bored out of monotony in a dull, lifeless conjugal life, Aparna has to adjust her emotional requirements with her much older husband who is 'a lover of silence and solitude' (65). On the other hand, she finds an 'unanticipated pleasure of her life' in Pranab, an Indian Bengali man, much

younger than her. In Usha's word, "it is clear to me now that my mother was in love with him" (67). While narrating the growing feelings of her mother for Pranab, Usha further recollects that "he brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she never felt. I don't think even my birth made her happy" (67). It is noticed that Usha's mother is caught between her conflicting face-need, both positive and negative, a need for solidarity and independence respectively (Brown and Levinson 1987). Simultaneously, she tries to placate her daughter from various activities which she does not find suitable as per her traditions and culture. Usha was not allowed to lead a care free life of America for Aparna feared that it would spoil her the way it did to Pranab. As Usha recounts, "it was an unspoken law that I was not allowed to date. ... I felt her grip on me tighten. She would fly into a rage when I told her I wanted to start wearing a bra, or if I wanted to go to Harvard square with a friend" (75-76). On the other hand Aparna's own need of independence is suppressed for the sake of her family needs. Being in a marital relationship, it would be shameful for her to reveal her passionate feeling for an outsider, Pranab. In Indian tradition it is not acceptable for a married woman to think or have feelings for a man other than her husband. Aparna realizes this fact and restrains herself from nurturing her feelings for Pranab. As recounted by her daughter Usha, "I was always there when he visited. It would have been inappropriate for my mother to receive him in the apartment alone; this was something that went without saying" (64). Aparna's fascination for Pranab, however, falls apart when Pranab gets married to an American woman, Deborah. Aparna's possessiveness for Pranab turns into a suppressed jealousy for Deborah. Her resentment is reflected when she forbids Usha from calling Deborah 'aunt', "what's the point? ... In a few weeks, the fun will be over and she'll leave him" (68). She also does not allow Usha to mingle with Deborah fearing that it would have an adverse effect on her daughter. In the wedding ceremony of Pranab and Deborah, Aparna does not allow Usha to stay back and enjoy the party, which creates an adverse effect on the mother-daughter relationship. As narrated by Usha:

I wanted to stay and when reluctantly, I walked over to where my parents sat, Deborah followed me. "Boudi, let Usha stay. She's having such a good time," she said to my mother. Lots of people will be heading back your way, someone can drop her off in a little while." But my mother said no, I had had plenty of fun already and forced me to put on my coat over my long puff-sleeved dress. As we drove home from the wedding I told my

mother, for the first but not the last time in my life that I hated her. (74)

The increasing restrictions on Usha from Aparna's side has its side effects in the form of growing rift between the duo. It is clear when Usha narrates: "it was clear to us both that I had stopped needing her, definitively and abruptly, just as Pranabkaku had" (77).

Initially in the story it is noticed that out of her possessiveness for Pranab and jealousy for Deborah Aparna criticizes indirectly: "he (Pranab) used to be so different. I don't understand how a person can change so suddenly. It's just hell-heaven, the difference (68-69). Aparna's conviction that Deborah, being an American girl cannot be a constant and faithful partner for Pranab and that he has become a prey for Deborah proved wrong when Pranab divorced Deborah for another Bengali woman after twenty-three years of marriage.

In the story there are instances of negotiation of identities in terms of intercultural acceptance, understanding. Characters from various backgrounds strive to mingle with each other. Characters celebrate various get togethers like thanksgiving ceremony, marriage of Pranab and Deborah. Deborah being from completely different culture accepts Indian tradition while regarding Usha's parents as quasi in-laws, sending flowers when Usha's grandparents died. Aparna, despite her dislikes for Pranab and Deborah relationship invites Pranab for a special meal before wedding 'to mark the end of her bachelorhood'(72). Also regardless of the monotony in her conjugal life Aparna has mended her suppressed emotional pang and as Usha, her daughter observes, "...as my parents approached their old age, she and my father had grown fond of each other... I noticed a warmth between my parents that had not been there before, a quiet teasing, a solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill"(81). Pranab, though strayed in various relationships respects Usha's parents and take their blessings before his wedding. He says to Usha's parents, 'your blessing is blessing enough'(72).

'Hell-heaven' is seen from a young girl's eyes and is a story about her mother's deep feelings for a person who comes almost out of the blue, into their lives. He is no stranger to them in that foreign land. Coming from Calcutta meant coming from the same family, bound together by language, traditions, food, if not by financial status. What transcends boundaries, is how an Indian married woman falls in love, secretly and how she comes out of it, and lives on. Denying her feelings throughout! It is only in adulthood that she realizes her mother's grief and the pain those years had entailed.

Conclusion

The above analysis of the story reveals the face that Lahiri is a master playwright who very competently depicts the real picture of diasporic struggle, the immigrants' confusion and dilemma. The author also displays a high level of sensitivity towards intercultural differences, cultural identity, cultural hybridity. Lahiri's protagonists are immigrants who undergo tremendous cultural struggle, confusion and conflict. They are in constant struggle between two cultures, two selves and multiple identities.

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