

A Feminist Inquiry into the Mother-Daughter Bond in Jhumpa Lahiri's Writings

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of the complex and dynamic mother-daughter relationship as inscribed in the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, with special focus on two of her short stories *Hell-Heaven* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. Jhumpa Lahiri often highlights the lives of women who have to deal with migration, displacement and cultural negotiation. The mother-daughter bond is an important aspect of her narratives. Mothers are often portrayed as custodians of tradition and memory, while daughters inherit and reshape the cultural memory based on their own lived experiences. In diasporic settings, it is the continuous clash between tradition and modernity, between memory and forgetting and between distance and intimacy that shapes the mother-daughter bond. Through the mother-daughter relationship, Lahiri reveals the role of postmemory in the evolution of intergenerational bonds as well as the function of patriarchy in determining the roles of mothers and daughters for each other. A feminist

analysis not only reveals the dual nature of the mother-daughter relationship that consists of both conflict and mutual understanding but it also depicts how the equations in personal spaces reflect the broader political issues. This paper attempts to reveal that the works of Jhumpa Lahiri demonstrate the mother-daughter bond as both deeply personal and profoundly political, reflecting the struggles of women to sustain identity, heritage, and agency across borders.

Keywords: Post memory, Mothers, Daughters, Patriarchy, Diaspora

1)Introduction

The domestic space has always been an area of study for literary explorations of greater political issues like gender, identity and power-structures. The diasporic household is often a sphere where political and economic issues are reflected through intimate familial relationships. In this context, the mother-daughter bond becomes an important site where the cultural and political outcomes of migration become transparent.

Jhumpa Lahiri, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, is deeply concerned with the lived experiences of Indian immigrants and their descendants. Her writings exemplify the intergenerational conflicts and negotiations in immigrant households. Rather than dramatizing the overt political ideas, Lahiri assimilates them into the everyday lives of her characters and thus makes political statements through the depiction of the personal. Her fiction focuses on highlighting the issues of Indian immigrants from a feminist point of view while offering a deep insight into their familial relationships. Lahiri's depiction of the mother-daughter relationship highlights both the conflict and the reconciliations reflecting the intergenerational bonds within Indian diasporic communities.

This study aims to analyse Jhumpa Lahiri's portrayal of mother-daughter bond in two of her short stories, *Hell-Heaven* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. *Hell-Heaven* appears in the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* while *Unaccustomed Earth* is the title story from the

collection with the same name. In *Hell-Heaven*, the narrative unfolds through Usha, the daughter of Bengali immigrants living in Boston. She recalls her mother's fondness for a family friend, Pranab who had come to the US for higher studies. He eventually falls in love with an American woman and marries her, leaving Usha's mother, Aparna, devastated. As Usha grows up, she develops an unstable relationship with her mother due to the generational and cultural gap. But as Usha matures, she starts to understand her mother better. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, the mother is already dead when the story begins. The third person narrative closely follows the perspective of Ruma who is the daughter. Her relationship with her mother is reflected through memory and guilt. Even though Ruma never wanted to follow the path of her mother, she has internalised her mother's sense of duty which is depicted in the way she looks after her son in a foreign land. Ruma finally understands the struggles and quite strength of her mother. By examining these stories, this study attempts to demonstrate the different aspects of mother-daughter relationship in a diasporic setting.

Virginia Woolf observes in *A Room of One's Own*, "We think back through our mothers if we are women," suggesting that the experiences of mothers form the foundation against which daughters create their own sense of self. In diasporic contexts where generational and cultural conflicts become amplified, the mother-daughter bond becomes even more crucial in constructing subjectivity in a woman. Immigrant mothers, particularly as first-generation immigrants, often depict memory, cultural heritage and tradition, while their daughters, born or raised in the adopted land have to strike a balance between those inherited values and the influences from their surroundings. This implies that a daughter's identity is not constructed in isolation but in constant dialogue with her mother. In Jhumpa Lahiri's *Hell-Heaven* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, this intergenerational exchange becomes evident through the mother-daughter dynamics. While Usha defines herself against her mother's nostalgia, Ruma internalizes her mother's sense of duty even as she seeks independence.

Thus, daughters form their identity not merely from cultural surroundings but also from the intimate relationship that they share with their mothers. For daughters, mothers serve as both anchors to heritage and the foils against which hybrid subjectivities are formed.

2)Patriarchy and the Mother-Daughter Bond

One cannot deny the fact that the mother–daughter relationship is deeply shaped by the structures of patriarchy that define women’s roles within both home and the society as well as within the homeland and the diaspora. For instance, in *Hell-Heaven*, Aparna depicts the patriarchal expectations of self-sacrifice and dependence while her own desires are muted within a marriage where the husband is emotionally absent. Her daughter, Usha understands these silences but resists inheriting them. Her inclination towards American lifestyle represents her attempt to break free from the restrictions of her mother’s path. Similarly, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma had seen her mother’s quiet submission to traditional gendered roles and her isolation within a patriarchal family system and the weight of these inherited silences have created a conflict in her psyche. Even though she feels compelled to respect her mother’s sacrifices she also doesn’t want to walk the same path as her mother. Thus, mothers function as custodians of patriarchal norms by transmitting gendered expectations to their daughters, while daughters, who grow up in the more liberal landscape of the host culture, negotiate autonomy and resist conformity. Thus, patriarchy simultaneously divides and connects mothers and daughters—dividing them through generational conflict, yet connecting them through the shared experience of patriarchy that shapes their diasporic identities.

3)Mothers as Custodians of Culture

Generally, mothers act as the custodians of culture and tradition by not only practicing the religious, culinary and linguistics habits of their culture but also by teaching them to their children. This role becomes even more prominent in diasporic settings. Immigrant mothers expect their children, particularly daughters to hold on to the cultural memory inherited by

them. These expectations lead to conflict often revealing the immigrant anxiety to find a balance between the root culture and the host culture. For instance, in *Hell- Heaven*, Aparna represents the first-generation immigrant who maintains a deep attachment to the traditions, language, and social norms of her native country. She insists upon speaking Bengali at home, participating in cultural festivals, and engaging with the Indian community. This reflects her desire to preserve culture and memory of her native land. For Aparna, nostalgia for her homeland serves as a coping mechanism in an unfamiliar environment and she wants to preserve this cultural memory by passing it on to her daughter. However, her daughter, Usha must navigate her mother's expectations alongside the realities of being an immigrant in the United States. This leads to tension between the mother and daughter. Similarly, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma's bond with her mother shows both distance and closeness with cultural memory. While her mother was alive, Ruma often saw her life as a housewife as something limiting and a path that she wanted to avoid. But after moving to a foreign country and becoming a mother herself, she begins to understand her mother's strength and power. She realises that her mother was the one that linked her and her father to their Bengali roots.

4) Daughters and Hybrid Identity Formation

First generation immigrant mothers remain attached to their cultural memory while second-generation immigrant daughters have to negotiate between this inherited cultural memory and the Western surrounding. This results in the formation of their hybrid identities. The experiences of Usha in *Hell-Heaven* depict Homi Bhabha's "third space," where hybrid identities are created through the negotiation between different cultural influences. She engages with American social norms but also inherits her mother's Bengali values. She shows ambivalence toward certain traditions while also having a desire to respect them. Similarly, in *Unaccustomed Earth*, Ruma who always wanted to have a path different from her mother, inherits much of her first-generation immigrant mother's sense of duty and guilt.

As a daughter she remains haunted by her mother's expectations to carry the weight of tradition. In both the stories, Lahiri depicts that the second-generation daughters carry the burden of inheriting the cultural memory while standing at the threshold of cultures and shaping identities through selective negotiations. While the first generation attempts to preserve and continue with the culture of the homeland, the second generation seeks to find a balance between the contradictions of the diasporic life.

5) Postmemory and the Mother-Daughter Relationship

The word 'postmemory' was coined by Marianne Hirsch. It refers to the ways in which children of survivors inherit memories of experiences that they did not live through. These memories are inherited through both words and silences. For instance, mothers do not always speak about their struggles, but daughters not only decipher the unspoken grief but they also inherit them as memory. In diasporic families, the relationship between mothers and daughters are often shaped by postmemory. Daughters not only inherit their mother's genes and dresses but they also inherit their psyche, their memory and their trauma. For instance, in *Hell-Heaven* we see that the daughter Usha grows up sensing her mother's pain and loneliness. The mother's struggles and emotional stress is carried by the daughter as a part of her own memory archive. Similarly, in *Unaccustomed Earth* Ruma is haunted by the memories of her dead mother dictating her own choices as a wife and mother. So, mothers transmit their memory and trauma not only verbally but also through silence and everyday habits. Sometimes daughters even resist being bound by the inherited memory. They use memories of their mothers as a ground for critique, distancing themselves from the paths that their mothers chose to form new and hybrid identities that negotiate between the inherited cultural memory of their mothers and their own lived experiences in the host country.

6) Intergenerational Conflict and Reconciliations.

The generation gap between mothers and daughters is often a cause of intergenerational conflict. This conflict is even more pronounced in diasporic homes. In Lahiri's *Hell-Heaven* and *Unaccustomed Earth*, cultural displacement, unspoken trauma, and the burden of inherited memory gives rise to intergenerational conflict in the mother-daughter relationship. While, *Hell-Heaven* tells the story of the conflict between a mother rooted in Bengali culture and tradition and a daughter assimilated into the American culture, *Unaccustomed Earth* highlights the legacy of maternal silence and sacrifice inherited as postmemory. However, in both these narratives, reconciliation is achieved not through the complete elimination of disagreements but through the daughter's retrospective understanding of her mother's struggles and choices. They come to understand their mothers not only as paternal figures but also as individuals with their own struggles and experiences. Thus, these stories depict the diasporic condition that both complicates the mother-daughter bond as well as enables moments of understanding and empathy that bridge the generational divide.

7)Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study has endeavoured to highlight the multiple intricacies of the mother-daughter relationship shaped through memory, migration and the patriarchal system in context of Jhumpa Lahiri's stories. The narratives under scrutiny reveal that the mother-daughter bond is loaded with both estrangement and the possibilities of reconciliation. Mothers are often considered as custodians of inherited traditions who try to imprint their daughters with their cultural memory while the daughters come to terms with identities that are neither completely inherited nor entirely assimilated, but rather hybrid. In this context, postmemory acts as the conduit through which unspoken griefs and thwarted aspirations of mothers are silently inherited by their daughters. Moreover, patriarchy shadows these intimacies, severing the agency of mothers and therefore intensifying the ambivalence

of daughters toward their maternal legacies. Thus, the mother-daughter relationship emerges not merely as a private domestic tie, but also as a site where history, displacement, and subjectivity intersect, imprinting the female experience with both burden and bequest.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of the second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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