

Reading an Interracial, Cross-Cultural Sisterhood in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Hell-Heaven*

Ved Mitra Shukla

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Rajdhani College (University of Delhi)

ABSTRACT

Emphasizing the sameness of women's secondary social positions in all societies and the family, representations of 'First World' women in the feminist movement with 'Third World' women establish the attainability of an interracial, cross-cultural sisterhood between the 'First World' and the 'Third World' women. The concept of sisterhood has been a binding force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy. The proposed paper is an attempt to understand the possibilities of an interracial, cross-cultural sisterhood from the points of view of postcolonial feminism in "Hell-Heaven", a short story written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The story deals with the theme of the broken hearts of women, belonging to different nations and cultures. Despite a generational gap between an American-born daughter and her Bengali mother, and the cultural and racial differences between Aparna and Deborah (and also Mrs. Holcomb), there has been established the notion of sisterhood among their sharing of common painful emotional feelings of isolation and broken heart because of the male patriarchy established by Pranab, Shyamal da, and Matty. It is believed that, through the male characters, Lahiri tries to weave a plot to prove sisterhood as a bond of relationship over and above caste, class, creed, culture, nationhood, and geographical boundaries.

KEYWORDS

Interracial; Cross-culture; Postcolonial feminism.

One of the areas of enquiry within postcolonialism is the representations of women of both once-colonized countries and Western countries, so far as the women's liberation movement is concerned. Such issue(s) can be questioned under the specifics of postcolonial feminist dialogues. As said and believed by John McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2010), 'feminist work is a constitutive part of the field of postcolonialism, and... issues of gender differences are central to each of the areas' (172-73) explored during the study of postcolonialism. Emphasizing

the sameness of women's secondary social positions in all societies and the family structure, representations of 'First World' women in the feminist movement with 'Third World' women establish the attainability of an interracial, cross-cultural sisterhood between the women from these two different worlds. This concept of sisterhood has been a binding force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy.

This paper is an attempt to understand the possibilities of an interracial, cross-cultural sisterhood from

the points of view of postcolonial feminism in *Hell-Heaven*, a short story written by Jhumpa Lahiri. As a daughter of Bengali parents who were settled in America, and thus, influenced by both, the heritage of India and the American values, she experiences multicultural heritages. She is a celebrated author of three books - *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond* (1999), *The Namesake* (2003), and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). *Hell-Heaven* is derived from Lahiri's recently published *Unaccustomed Earth*. This is an anthology of eight stories. Out of which, five independent stories constitute part one, where all of them have different characters and settings. And the other three dependent stories form part two with the same characters and settings. All stories focus on members of 'Third World', particularly Bengali emigrants either in America or in England, and the members of 'First World' who comes in contact with the former. Undoubtedly, Lahiri's writings are primarily concerned with the people of the Indian diaspora, but their real significance lies in the depiction of the universal human conditions which generates diverse issues from different perspectives in the mind of an analyst.

The story, *Hell-Heaven*, is an intricate narrative dealing with two families, i.e. of Aparna's and Deborah's. Aparna's family consists of her husband, Shyamal da, and her daughter, Usha. All three of her family members are the members of Indian diaspora in America. In Deborah's family, mainly her husband, Pranab Chakrobarty, her brother, Matty, and her parents are relevant in terms of theme. Her family is an Indo-American family. Other characters like Pranab's second wife (an already married Bengali woman), Aparna's neighbour, Mrs. Holcomb, Pranab's parents et al are also important in weaving a well-knit plot. It is because of Pranab that these families are linked to each other. When he was a graduate student at MIT (Boston), and

thinking of returning to his native land, Calcutta, due to a lack of proper Bengali food, he was supported by a traditional Bengali woman, Aparna. Her husband, Shyamal da, was a researcher by profession and a lover of silence and solitude. His relationship with Aparna and his daughter, Usha, was not very cordial. Under such circumstances, there was developing a unique kind of love between Pranab and Aparna. He was reliant on her, needing her in a way her husband never did in the whole history of his married life. Being a traditional Bengali woman, it was never possible consciously to have Pranab for herself. Therefore, for the marriage of Pranab, she used to show him pictures of her younger cousins to keep him in the family. But her care/love for him turns into jealousy when he becomes closer to an American woman, i.e., Deborah, whom he marries in due course. Being a woman of color and also due to her inherited racial prejudice, Aparna keeps blaming and criticizing Deborah and keeps reiterating that it is just a matter of time before Deborah breaks up her relationship with Pranab. But it was Pranab who had divorced Deborah after their twenty-three years of marriage. The reason behind the divorce was his extramarital affair with another woman of Bengali origin who was already married. In this way, he was 'destroying two families in the process'. The story also recounts the relationship of Usha with Matty who deceives her:

We began flirting, talking of things I no longer remember, and eventually, we wandered into a rocky inlet and Matty fished a joint out of his pocket. We turned our backs to the wind and smoked it, our cold fingers touching in the process, our lips pressed to the same damp section of the rolling paper... Of course, it was Matty who drove me home, and sitting in my parents' driveway I kissed him, at once thrilled and terrified that my

mother might walk onto the lawn in her nightgown and discover us. I gave Matty my phone number, and for a few weeks I thought of him constantly, and hoped foolishly that he would call. (80-81)

As a person of second-generation diaspora, Usha's lack of an easily categorized identity offers an understanding of a situation as a woman and postcolonial subject. The story is written from the perspective of the first-person. Usha as a daughter talks about her mother's relationship with Pranab Kaku. When her mother confesses her suicidal attempt due to Pranab who broke her heart, Usha realizes as an adult that her mother was really in love with him.

The story deals with the theme of the broken hearts of some women, belonging to two different nations and cultures. Despite a generation gap between an American-born daughter and her Bengali mother, and the cultural and racial differences between Aparna and Deborah (and also Mrs. Holcomb), there has been established the notion of sisterhood among their sharing of common painful emotional feelings of isolation and broken heart that is because of the patriarchy established by Pranab, Shyamal da, and Matty. It is through the male characters like Pranab, Shyamal da, and Matty that Lahiri tries to weave the plot to prove sisterhood as a bond of relationship over and above caste, class, creed, culture, nationhood, and geographical boundaries. This paper tries to find out how Lahiri establishes 'sisterhood' among these through her narrative.

Theoretically, it is reclaimed by many feminist critics that 'the revolutionary potential of sisterhood' is an essential need of the feminist movement. But, at the same time, the possibility of 'sisterhood' beyond race, culture, and nation is questioned by critics. Like Schweitzer:

The questions that haunt this study are timely: can individual friendships across differences serve as models for larger, interactive communities and, ultimately, for a polycultural nation? Can their fictional representations help to raise consciousness? And how can we evolve discourses of affiliation and coalition that avoid the pitfalls of solipsism bred by white privilege? (143)

Similarly, Dixon says:

The term, 'sister' implies no power differential. How can one be 'sisters' with those one oppresses? 'Sisters' are in the same family, with the same history. Shared experience leads to a way of knowing and seeing the world, and each other, that is itself shared. The term, then, does not hold up well when I try to apply it to feminism or my black 'sisters'. My experiences of oppression differ in numerous ways from those of my 'sisters'. It would be unjust and incorrect for me to deny the realities of privilege and disenfranchisement. (104)

But, in the same essay, she answers herself in the favour of the sisterhood and counters questions: "How does one's culture or the society one moves in conscientious one? Do we become who we are despite, or because of, our culture and society (105)?" She, finally, says that "differences must not stand in the way of social justice (106)." In order to make an end to differences, others emphasize the establishment of communication. "For combating racism, classism, and sexism, minority and white women must first stop talking past each other and establish communication (Simons 82)."

Theories regarding 'sisterhood' as discussed by the critics are represented through the characters in the story, "Hell-Heaven". At the end of the story, we are told by the narrator how Deborah, divorced by

Pranab, was supported by Aparna. "In her shock and grief, it was my mother [Aparna] whom Deborah turned to, calling and weeping into the phone (81)." We are also narrated that both women despite belonging to a different nations, races and cultures not only established communication but also stopped talking their past/racial prejudices, especially from the side of Aparna to achieve solidarity:

My mother assured Deborah that she blamed her for nothing. She confessed nothing to Deborah about her own jealousy of decades before, only that she was sorry for what had happened, that it was a sad and terrible thing for their family. (82)

They were aware of their cultural differences and racial prejudices. However, they were sisters united by shared beliefs and experiences and united in their struggle to share (or end) common oppression.

It is believed that women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and other prejudices. These are barriers to solidarity between the women. The eradication of such untying factors can unite the white women and the women of colour against the patriarchy. In the narrative, this aspect is well depicted within the limited scope of a story through the characters and the situations. It is a sexist and racist attitude that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause and teaches misogyny consciously or unconsciously. We are informed by the narrator how fears, prejudices, resentments, competitiveness, jealousy, etc. occur between Aparna and Deborah in the form of male-domination:

I asked my mother, as she was straightening up the living room, if I address her as Deborah Kakima, turning her into an aunt as I had turned Pranab into an uncle. "What's the point?" my mother said, looking back at me sharply. "In a few weeks, the fun will be over and she'll leave

him..." I found her utterly beautiful, but according to my mother she had spots on her face, and her lips were too small... The more my mother began to resent Deborah's visits, the more I began to anticipate them... Sometimes she asked me how to say this or that in Bengali; once, she asked me what Asobbha 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. I felt protective of her, aware that she was unwanted, that she was resented, and aware of the nasty things people said. (67-70)

Deborah also confesses her sexist attitude:

I was so horribly jealous of you back then, for knowing him, understanding him in a way I never could. He turned his back on his family, on all of you, really, but I still threatened. I could never get over that. (82)

At the end of the story, through the acknowledgment of their prejudices to remove the barriers to the sisterhood, these characters represent Hooks' model of the sisterhood. Hooks says that women do not need to eradicate differences to feel solidarity. They can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in their appreciation for diversity, united in their struggle to end sexist oppression, and united in political solidarity (138). They show their concern for the collective struggle against the emotional violence of Pranab and secure their sisterhood.

The part as a narrator played by Usha in establishing the sisterhood is remarkable. Usha represents the second generation of the Indian diaspora, and Aparna, the first one. It is appealing how the sisterhood is established between the women of these two generations of the Indian diaspora. Certainly, some situations depicting the generation gap are influential in the story. As an illustrative instance, the

comparison between the narrator and her mother is noteworthy:

I began keeping other secrets from her, evading her with the aid of my friends. I told her I was sleeping over at a friend's when really, I went to parties, drinking beer and allowing boys to kiss me and fondle my breasts and press their erections against my hip as we lay groping on a sofa or the backseat of a car. I began to pity my mother; the older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led. She had never worked, and during the day she watched soap operas to pass the time. Her only job, every day, was to clean and cook for my father and me. (76)

Despite these differences as shown in the narrative, there is a string of common feelings of broken hearts and isolation found after an understanding of their situations as a woman and postcolonial subjects that establishes the sisterhood against the idea of male supremacy. At the end of the narrative, both women (Usha and her mother) communicate and share their feelings of subjugation and emotional

exploitation emerging out of the patriarchy. For the consolation of Usha, who is deceived in love by a man, Aparna confesses her deep love for Pranab and break-up with the same. The narrator says, "It was to me that she confessed after my own heart was broken by a man I'd hoped to marry (83)."

To conclude, this paper may be questioned on the grounds whether the fictional representations of the notion of sisterhood beyond nation, culture, race, and creed is in reality possible, and whether Lahiri, a celebrated writer of the Indian diaspora, is directing and shaping strategies for the establishment of sisterhood through her writings or it is just a deconstruction of her story. But so far as the present analysis is concerned, the purpose is to read the following statement in the story through its characters and their situations:

As feminists, we must not avoid, but invite dialogue, and confront racism and classism, as well as sexism, on both a personal and a theoretical level, if we are to achieve the coalitions enabling feminism to become a truly international and intercultural movement. (Simons 399)

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