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Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

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www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Family Bondage in Diasporic Space: Firm or Fragile

N.Nagajothi

Ph.D Scholar/ Research Centre of English Language & Literature
V.V.Vanniaperummal college for women, Virudhunagar 626 001.
TamilNadu , India.

Human relationships are innate and key bondage throughout the Universe. Human hearts are bonded with sensitive chords of family ties. In this neo-colonial era, when chords of family bondage is stretched across continents and generations, it changes it gets debilitated. The largely heterogeneous culture in the diasporic family space gives way to conflicts and complex pattern of relationship. This paper prompts to scrutinize how do family ties and family loyalty transmute in the process of immigration with reference to Chitra Banerjee's "Mrs.Dutta Writes a Letter" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth".

Diasporic Family Space

Human relationships are an integral and intrinsic part of humanity. "Home is where you move frequently through the dark". (Divakaruni 117) (qtd. in Sandhya 205). It is at home, human hearts are connected with sensitive chords of family bondage. Such family bondage is at the crossroads in the immigrant families. The era of globalization and constant relocations across countries have redefined the concepts of home and family bondage in the context of neo-colonialism. The largely heterogeneous culture in the diasporic family space gives way to conflicts and complex pattern of relationship. The first generation Indian American community, attempts to inscribe the Indian cultural ethos in the new immigrant country. But the second generation imbibes the American mainstream culture and disapproves of their parents' proximity to the ancestral 'home' culture. As a result both the generations live in different cultural worlds with much acculturation discrepancies which results in family discord.

This paper analyses two short stories of Bengali-American female writers – Chitra Banerjee's "Mrs.Dutta Writes a Letter" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth". The core of analysis has been prompted to scrutinize the vigour of family bondage in diasporic family space against the backdrop of generational conflicts and cultural identity crisis. The word 'space' here suggests not just a geographical location, but a vigorous interactive network of relations. Foucault asserts that, space is fundamental in any form of communal life:

The space in which we live [...] is also in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things [...] we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not super imposable on one another. (<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>).

Ruma's mother – a cultural anchor

Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) discusses the problem of complicated intergenerational relationships reviewed from migrant's perspective. Chitraleka Basu in her review of *Unaccustomed Earth* rightly opines: "Lahiri's hall marks are an extraordinarily sensitive understanding of the mutability of human relationships and the skilled

detailing of these emotions". The title story "Unaccustomed Earth" focuses on the renegotiated relationship between Ruma and her father. She reckons her natal family as a source of shelter and support for her "alternatal family". Natal family denotes the family into which one is born. Alternatal family is the coinage of Ambreen Hai, by which he means family of procreation, the family one creates through marriage. (185).

Ruma in her late thirties, with a young sibling Akash and expecting another one in neo-colonial America, longs for maternal comfort with the sudden demise of her mother. Ruma cannot resist mourning her mother's empty space, which leads her to emotional alienation. Ruma's life is at two different poles before and after her mother's death. Ruma was exhausted by her domestic chores with the absence of her mother and her fruitful advice. Taking care of Akash took Ruma's full concern leaving little room for socializing. She is so disinterested in everything that she avoids human ties and social relationship in Seattle. Ruma's social isolation and her solitude lead to discontentment and frustration. The death of her mother rendered such a shock that had brought tremendous effect on her conjugal life. Whatever freedom and happiness Adam tries to provide Ruma, she finds herself estranged from her spouse Adam and feels the sense of void in her life.

The role of mother in a family is a crucial one, who not only nourishes the family but also nurtures the social, cultural values, customs and tradition. Ruma's mother represents cultural anchor in the family with her deep-seated Bengali roots. She never allows her children to speak other than Bengali. She dissuades Ruma to marry an American because she worries that marrying a Euro-American will eclipse Ruma's Indian identity. But when the marriage works out she begins to love Adam as a son, whenever visiting Ruma's home, she would always bring a picnic cooler filled with homemade mishti, elaborate, syrupy, cream-filled concoctions which Ruma has never learnt to make and Adam loved. Ruma's mother is very keen in introducing Indian traditions to her American-son-in law through her Indian cuisines. It supplies a bond between Indian mother-in-law and American-son-in-law, but this bondage is severed with the demise of Ruma's mother. Ruma is unable to concoct her mother's Indian dishes. She is impuissant to translate her ancestral Bengali cultural values to her fledging family without the cultural anchorage of her mother. Ruma still needed her mother but," her mother no longer existed. Where had her mother gone, when life persisted, when Ruma still needed her to explain so many things?" (UE 59)

Complicated Father-Daughter relationship

Ruma's bondage with her mother undergoes a gradual evolution in her middle age resulting in close affinity between them. The void between Ruma and her father seems to grow bigger after her mother's permanent absence. While Ruma is totally unmoored with her mother's loss, his father seems to be unaffected and untouched by it. He "wipes out her mother's presence" (UE 6) by selling the family house and started travelling all around Europe, enjoying the freedom of a widower. The fragmented and incomplete sentences referring to his schedule and travel updates aptly exemplify the shattered father-daughter bond. Yet the story unfolds several glimpses of fatherly concern and affection during his visit to Ruma.

Ruma's father willfully performed many household duties and of a great help to Ruma. He takes the role of nurturing grandfather for Akash. He sows the seeds of Bengali cultural customs within Akash such as taking off shoes inside the house, eating with fingers and learning

Bengali words – the customs which Ruma has abandoned. He is a supportive “feminist father” who insists on significance of self-reliance in his daughter’s life. He encourages his daughter not to sacrifice her career as a lawyer for the sake of motherhood: ‘Work is important Ruma. Not only for financial stability. For mental stability’ (UE 38). Ruma’s father realizes how much Ruma is inextricably interlinked with her mother despite her rootedness in American soil. She engrossed herself in the chain of domestic chores, renouncing her career, ambitions and possibilities concerning self-realization. The moments of self-doubts and insecurity, the feelings of alienation and isolation are passed down from her mother as parts of genetic predispositions. Ruma’s father ruminates:

“Like his wife, Ruma was now alone in this new place, over-whelmed, without friends, caring for a young child, all of it reminding him, too much, of the early years of his marriage, years for which his wife has never forgives him” (UE 40).

Thus children are contaminated by their parent’s migrant experience and parent-child kinship may be regarded as a continuation of the dialogue between past and present. Stuart Hall rightly claims in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”: “Cultural identity is not a fixed essence” but a “positioning “constructed through memory and narrative”. (113).

Pull between American mores and Ancestral roots

As a second generation Diaspora, Ruma displays typical signs of assimilation and alienation from Bengali customs, a change noticed by her father as his children grew up:

“The more the children grew, the less they seemed to resemble either parent - they spoke differently, dressed differently, seemed foreign in every way, from the texture of their hair to the shapes of their feet and hands” (UE 54).

Lev Grossman’s assertion in *Time* that “everyone in Lahiri’s fiction is pulled in at least six directions at once” is true with Ruma; she is torn between sense of self and filial duty, American mores and ancestral Bengali roots and also between natal and fledging family. She enjoys bliss of American individualism regarding the crucial decision of education, marriage, job and ultimately her way of life. But there is a pull of ancestral culture and value system of her parents’ homeland underneath her, creates a tension within her. It is because of this pull, she preferred to follow her mother’s life style of a homemaker. “Growing up, her mother’s example moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household – had served as a warning, a path to avoid. Yet this was Ruma’s life now” (UE 11).

Ruma struggles to continue her Bengali tradition by teaching Akash some Bengali words in babyhood. But when he grows out of his babyhood she switches to English, feeling that “Bengali had never been a language in which she had felt like an adult. Her own Bengali was slipping from her.” (UE 12). Her sense of self as being incompletely Indian is connected to her incomplete mastery of Bengali language. Werner Sollors has defined the essence of ethnicity as any boundary-constructing processor that function as markers between groups (192). Food and Language are important cultural markers. Ruma is inept to import these two cultural markers in her “alternatal” family. Ruma inherited the legacies of physical appearance from her mother but with bottom level of cultural legacies.

She drifts away from her Bengali roots with her scanty Bengali words and unskilled cookery of Indian food. Ruma stumbles to walk a tight rope between Indian and American identities and cuts a sorry figure in negotiating her cultural identity. Her inability to read her father's letter in Bengali focuses Ruma's feeling of being out of touch with her 'self', her family and her heritage. Ruma's stance proves the notion of Lowenthal that remembering the past is crucial for our sense of identity and the lack of link to ancestral (personal) history, may lead to the disruption of self-continuity and personal integration. (197).

Conflict between family bondage and self-identity

Ruma was indecisive of including her widowed father in her fledging family network. She was a bit reluctant to perform the huge duties towards her father. Though Ruma's father openheartedly praised whatever Ruma managed to prepare, she could not imagine tending to her father with delicious Indian meals as her mother used to cook. She feared that her father would become an added responsibility in her life. "It would mean an end to the family she'd created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash" (UE 7). While Ruma develops a harmonious bonding with her mother after maternity, her kinship with her father proves to be a static and distant one.

Ruma's father rejected Ruma's offer to stay with her, as his psyche is preoccupied with bliss of American individualism and sense of self-identity. Besides achieving the outlook of a Native American he has imbibed the core of American life style as a "paradoxical gift" (Said 336) of immigrant experience. He found free from the shackles of family ties with the loss of his life partner. Loneliness could not engulf his liberating existence. He took trips so often, which offers him a new companion Mrs. Bagchi, a widowed Bengali-American professor. He is unwilling to disclose his new found "(non-procreative) alternatal alliance" (Ambreen Hai 197) to Ruma, knowing that Ruma will not justify his stand to replace her mother's space with Mrs. Bagchi. He has a preference for self-reliant living, than to live with his daughter. He justified his decision this way, which also testifies his fragile bondage with his own natal family. The following text signifies how Ruma's father turned on his back on his parents in the name of ambitions and accomplishments, which the cross cultural space has offered to him :

Ruma hadn't been raised with that sense of duty. She led her own life, had made her own decisions, married an American boy. He didn't expect her to take him in... For what had he done, when his father was dying and his mother left behind?... there was no question of moving the(*alternatal*) family back to India and also no question of his eighty year old widowed mother moving to Pennsylvania (UE 29, *emphasis added*).

Ruma's father- a source of shelter and support

Family is the site of restriction for Ruma's father from which he wants to break away to form a new self, a new composite identity. He wants to maintain a distance between his individual self and his family and so he rejects Ruma's offer to stay with her in Seattle. Moreover Ruma's father is not interested in putting down roots again with his daughter's family on the West coast after re-rooting as an immigrant in the East coast. Instead he helps Ruma how to cope with parental loss and put down roots in her new home. Lahiri elaborates this key issue through the central figure of gardening:

[...] in honor of his wife, a small hydrangea. In a plot behind the kitchen, unable to resist, he also put in a few tomatoes along with marigolds. [...] He spaced out the delphiniums, tied to stuck some gladiola bulbs into the ground.[...] He looked over Akash's little plot, the dirt carefully mounded up around his toys, pens and pencils stuck into the ground (*UE* 49)

Ruma's father cultivates her barren backyard by various elements such as his Bengali wife's favourite hydrangea, American daughter's needs (Indian and American vegetables) and American grandson's toys and garbage collection. Ruma's barren backyard signifies her dislocation, her lack of roots and lack of belonging. By cultivating her garden Ruma's father enables her to put down roots in unaccustomed earth with Bengali and American cultural influences. Thus Ruma's father becomes the only source of shelter and support after her mother.

Bondage of Intimacy and Detachment

Ruma suffers from "double displacement" and she is able to identify neither with her ancestral land nor with America. Ruma's identity crisis made her "un-homed" and a "psychological refugee". (Lois Tyson 241). Her sense of alienation is wiped out by her father's passion to "toil in unfriendly soil" (*UE*16). Though there is an uncomfortable wedge between Ruma and her father, her father turns out to be the rescuer from her identity crisis. He succeeds in reconstruction of all that was deconstructed by the displacement and dislocation in Ruma's psyche. Therefore the bondage between Ruma and her father is neither firm nor fragile. To be true their bondage is a dichotomy of care and neglect. The decision of Ruma to post her father's Bengali letter to Mrs. Bagchi is suggestive of their kinship as amalgamation of intimacy and detachment. In her narrative style, Lahiri has adopted a curious technique of intimacy of the close perspectives and the detachment of third person narration to depict the dichotomous nature of the father – daughter bondage with intimacy and detachment.

Inexorable cultural differences among generations

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter" was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1998 and was included in Divakaruni's second short story collection, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* (2001). Chitra Banerjee's "literary voice is a sensual bridge between worlds India and America, Children and Parents, Men and Women, Passion and Pragmatism" (*USA Today*). Mrs. Dutta, an Indian widow with the sense of duty and love decides to live with her son Sagar and his family in San Francisco Bay area. She finds herself treading the rocky terrain of American culture. Her dream of awaiting paradise in her son's family turns into a nightmare. Throughout the story Mrs. Dutta tries to disentangle her confused immigrant experience through her letters to her neighbour Roma in India.

The main theme seems to be the psychological aspect of acculturation among three generations – Old woman Mrs. Dutta, Parents Sagar and Shyamoli and Kids Pradeep and Mirinalini. Each generations live in different cultural worlds with much acculturation discrepancies which results in cleavage of family bonds. Thus familial relations and cultural differences are the linchpin of this short story. As Deepika Gurdev claims, "this story wonderfully explores a whole new gamut of human relations and the inevitable divide between East and West". (*The Sunday Tribune*)

Mrs. Dutta is a dependent female immigrant unlike Ruma's father. Her arrival to America is a matter of family reunification rather than individual determination to leave India for the sake of profession. According to Nita Shah, women belonging to recent immigration waves find it difficult to integrate themselves into the host culture than men: "An unassimilable segment of society, they are impeded by poor communication skills [...] the women even more so than the men" (qtd in Grewal 98). Mr. Dutta's Indian moral codes conflict with the American customs of her son's family. Mr. Dutta finds it impossible to dilute the Indian custom of, "*good wife wakes before the rest of the household*". (MDWL 1, original emphasis). She is so traditional and sticks on to the old customs to the extent of using neem stick instead of minty tooth paste in her homeland. Being a good sociable and neighbourly Indian old woman she wanted to visit her next-door neighbour, when she first arrived at Sagar's home. Shyamoli stopped her by explaining that it is not the custom in California to drop in on people without calling ahead. Mr. Dutta gets confused with 'American privacy' as neighbours enjoyed each other's presence in India. Jaydeep Sarangi rightly opines: "Culture provide a man (*woman*) with a system of meaning, which is *valid* within his (*her*) own socio-cultural group". (39, emphasis added).

Acculturation discrepancies

Conflicts are higher in Indian American families when (grand) parents and adolescents are mismatched on acculturation style. Shyamoli and Sagar know their roots but they also know that to achieve success they need to adapt to new cultural codes of immigrant country. To use Homi Bhaba's terms they live in the "third space" characterized by "in-betweenness" (37). Their entrance into the third space is a deliberate act. They are aware of what they leave behind in their homeland and what opportunities are in the new country for them and their progeny. Their life is an inevitable progression to assimilation and they find it easier to re-root their identity on the new soil of unaccustomed earth. Shyamoli was once a modest, respectable Indian young lady with conservative Indian culture, but the period of ten years in the United States weakens her ties with the ancestral land and forces her to be away from the endearing, filial family and community. She allows herself to move towards a hybrid cultural location.

Mr. Dutta wonders at the curious custom of children being allowed to close their doors against their parents. She is indignant at Shyamoli's indifference in letting her children "unrebuked" for their disrespectful way towards elders. She is horrified when Shyamoli brought laundry into the family room and pulled out Mrs. Dutta's undergarment before everyone. As the first generation old woman, it is the question of chastity for her; but Shyamoli being the second generation Bengali American woman, with the spirit of emancipation, does not cherish any such moral codes. Mr. Dutta who is ignorant of American etiquettes, struggles to understand the culture and customs of her assimilated children and grand children. Besides customs, technologies and machinery for performing household duties also terrify her. She is scared of machines for washing clothes. However she struggled to get accustomed with unaccustomed American life style with a positive stance:

"Dear Roma, although I miss you, I know you will be pleased to hear how happy I am in America. There is much here that needs getting used to but we are no strangers to adjusting, we old women. After all haven't we been doing it all our lives?" (MDWL 32).

Cultural barriers tearing human hearts

Mrs. Dutta reminds herself the “land of America is home now” though the American protocols baffles her. But her positive disposition gets changed gradually after encountering American practice which contradict her inherited beliefs and she expresses her nostalgia for home, “Oh Roma? I miss it all much sometimes I feel that someone has reached in and torn out a handful of my chest” (MDWL 8). Yet she strives to find solace in cooking Indian food for her loved ones:

“At least the family’s eating well since I arrived... proper Indian food, rutis that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pullao with raisins and cashews and ghee”. (MDWL 9).

Being an immigrant and minority in a vast American society, Shyamoli is very keen of not to be marginalized as ‘Others’. When Mr. Dutta requests to put up a drying rack in the back yard, Shyamoli protests, “It’s just not *done* in a nice neighbourhood like this one. And being the only Indian family on the street, we have to be extra careful”. (MDWL 13-14, emphasis original). That is why she bursts out when she knows that Mrs. Dutta drapes her clothes over the fence to dry. She considers it as a word of insult when her American neighbour instructs, “Kindly tell the old lady not to dry her clothes over the fence into my yard”. Fear of discrimination and sense of self makes her tear the heart of her mother in law with bitter words, “I know having her (*Mrs. Dutta*) here is important to you (*Sagar*). But I just can’t. Some days I feel like taking the kids and leaving” (MDWL 28-29, *emphasis added*)

Filial neglect

As Sagar and Shyamoli have confirmed to American society, they raised their children Pradeep and Mirinalini with American values. They call Mirinalini as “Minnie” and Pradeep as “Pat” – a comprehensive hint of the family’s assimilation into American culture. Born in the United States, Pradeep and Mirinalini, the third generation in the family, have imbibed breathe of American culture easily. In order to fit and be accepted by their peers in school, they are lured towards larger social space of American codes than the limited family space of Indian moral codes. They are brought up in media-driven and hi-tech American society with their western cultures. Mrs. Dutta is a steadfast Indian woman of moral codes. So the conflicts between their beliefs and attitudes, customs and cultures make them foreigners to each other:

... they (*grand children*) offer the most transparent excuses when she asks them to sit with her while she chants the evening arati... their American voices rising in excitement as they discuss a glittering, alien world of Power Rangers, Spice Girls, and Sprit Week at school, she almost cannot believe what she hears. (MDWL 11).

In Lahiri’s “Unaccustomed Earth” Ruma’s son Akash calls Ruma’s father as “Dadu” and Akash has some filial attachment to his grandfather. There is no such attachment for the grandchildren towards their paternal grandma in Chitra Banerjee’s short story. Mirinalini refers to Mrs. Dutta as “She” like an outsider. Though her grandchildren disrespect her, belittle her, she lauds them as her “flesh and blood”. She considers Sagar and his siblings as her only family. Sagar’s family has been far away from her for many years but now their love is put to test through her arrival on the Diasporic family space. She has faced the filial neglect in the backdrop of culture shock. She cannot bridge the gap of acculturation with the younger generations. She felt as a refugee among her own blood relations. Meril Silverstein and Xuan Chen rightly pinpoints the same, “the gap in

cultural values between generations suppresses social interaction between grandparents and their grand children and overtime reduces intimacy in their relationship, at least from the point of view of grandchildren” (196).

Fragile family bondage

The changing cultural paradigms are the barrier between human hearts which results in fragile family bondage. There is a great conflict between younger generation’s desire for “intergenerational autonomy” to the older generation’s desire for “intergenerational continuity” (Silverstein and Chen 198). Though Ruma of “Unaccustomed Earth” fears that her father’s arrival would put an end to the family she has created on her own, she longs for maternal comfort and parental support. Shyamoli does not expect any such maternal comfort and support from Mrs.Dutta. Even if she calls Mrs.Dutta compassionately ‘mother’, she has the impression that Mrs.Dutta has taken over the authority in the family. She feels excluded after the arrival of Mrs.Dutta and fears that her mother in law’s arrival has put an end to the family she has created on her own. Her words ‘my children’, ‘my house’ explicitly confirms the same:

Ordering *my children* to stop doing things I’ve have given them permission to do. She’s taken over the entire kitchen, cooking whatever she likes... I feel this isn’t *my house* anymore. (MDWL 30, *emphasis added*)

Sagar is compassionate with his mother as much as he can. He tries hard to be a ‘solicitous son’ tiptoeing around his mother’s feelings. But he cannot make her to be accustomed with the ethics of American life style.

Transformation from Dependency to Autonomy

As an old woman Mrs.Dutta is committed to the ideals of female submissiveness. But her stay in America modifies her perspectives related to the inherited model of womanhood. Through Shyamoli, the old woman is faced with a different model of womanhood that impresses her. In the beginning Mrs.Dutta believes that a woman is defined by her relationship with others (as a mother, daughter –in-law and wife). Her decision to come to America itself is dictated by an Indian norm – ‘a widow’s place is with her son’s family’. But her experience in America awakened the sense of individuality. During Sagar and Shyamoli’s fight, she does not wait until things settle down. Instead she ignores the conflict and gives priority to her own matter of writing letter to Roma, which exemplifies how American sense of self-identity is contagious.

Her American journey makes Mrs.Dutta to understand where she truly belongs. Her decision of going back to India, to live on her own is the ultimate gesture of self-assertion. Her journey to America can be interpreted as transformation from dependency to autonomy. Moreover she realizes that she is an outsider in her son’s conjugal nuclear family. She is superfluous and her maternal comfort and support are not needed in her son’s efficiently run household. She starts a new journey of ‘self-discovery’ to figure out what is happiness. She conceives happiness in different terms:

Happiness is not about being needed. It isn’t about being with family either... Perhaps we can figure it out together, two old women drinking cha in your downstairs flat (for I do hope you will rent it to me on my return). (MDWL 33-34).

Thus Mrs. Dutta's physical displacement forces her to shatter her limited notions of happiness and womanhood.

Conclusion

Ruma in Lahiri's "Unaccustomed Earth" embarks upon the phase of reconstruction after identity crisis. Her father, imbibing the core of American life style, succeeds in the reconstruction of all that was deconstructed by the displacement and dislocation. But for Mrs. Dutta even the reconstruction gets deconstructed. She picks up the pieces of her shattered hopes and aspirations and returns her homeland. Mrs. Dutta's short cultural transplantation in American soil cultivates the florets of self-assertion, female emancipation and new concept of happiness.

Though Ruma of "Unaccustomed Earth" fears that her father's arrival would put an end to the family she has created on her own, she longs for maternal comfort and parental support. The bondage between Ruma and her father is neither firm nor fragile. To be true their bondage is an amalgamation of intimacy and detachment. But in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's short story "Mrs Dutta Writes a Letter", Mrs Dutta is superfluous and her maternal comfort and support are not needed in her son's efficiently run household. She has faced filial neglect in the backdrop of culture shock. She cannot bridge the gap of acculturation with the younger generations. She feels as a refugee among her own blood relations. In this story each generation lives in different cultural worlds with much acculturation discrepancies which result in cleavage of family bonds.

Both the stories have poignantly portrayed the eternal struggle of Indian American community with disruptive cultural differences. Jhumpa Lahiri and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni have touchingly encapsulated, how do family ties and family loyalty transmute in the process of immigration. Though cleavage of family ties prevails in India, it is much prevalent in a different cultural ethos.

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