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Clothes as a Marker of Cultural Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Hell-Heaven"

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Abstract:

The popular idiom "Clothes make the man" hints that clothes greatly influence the way in which a person is perceived by the society. The clothes one wear can be a primary index of individuality; more importantly, they often serve as a parameter for determining the gender, class, race and religion of a person. However, in the context of migrant population, clothes can serve as prominent tangible cultural elements which will help in asserting one's cultural identity in an alien land. Like most of the fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri, "Hell-Heaven" is a short story about an Indian Bengali expatriate family living in America. This paper will focus on the imageries and tropes of clothes used by Jhumpa Lahiri in the narrative in an attempt to study these cultural materials as markers of cultural identity of the migrant characters, both first and second-generation diaspora, present in the story.

Keywords: culture, explicit culture, implicit culture, cultural identity, diaspora.

The English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor in his *Primitive Culture* (1871) puts forward the first anthropological definition of culture: "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). This enumerative definition led to the conceptualisation of the much acquainted term "culture." Even after decades, Tylor's definition of culture continues to influence many anthropologists and sociologists in their attempt of delineating and simplifying this broad concept of culture. The American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits in his *Man and His Works: The Science of Cultural Anthropology* (1948) came up with a concise yet concrete definition stating that culture is "the man-made part of the environment" (17). Parallel to the extensive anthropological definition of "culture", the sociologist Peter L. Berger, in his *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967) defines culture as "totality of man's products" which is inclusive of both material and non-material cultural elements (6). Robert Wuthnow and Marsha Witten, in their essay "New Directions in the Study of Culture" (1988), term the material cultural elements as "explicit culture" and the non-material cultural elements as "implicit culture." Wuthnow and Witten propose that sociologists should make such distinctions as such divisions will make it simpler for them to analyse culture more accurately. By implicit culture, they meant the abstract constituent of culture which is hard to identify if not observed closely and minutely. Norms, traditions and value system form the essential cultural elements of a society but these elements are difficult to spot out easily without an intimate examination. By explicit culture, Wuthnow and Witten meant the tangible elements of culture, "a kind of symbolic good or commodity that is

explicitly produced," (50). Food habits and clothes are obvious examples of explicit culture. This paper focuses on the symbolic and expressive significance of the imageries of clothes interspersed into the narrative of the short story "Hell-Heaven" by Jhumpa Lahiri. It attempts to study the tropes of clothes as a prominent marker of cultural identity of the characters present in the short story. Thus, explicit culture becomes the concerned domain for this paper for the analysis of the cultural identity of the first and second-generation diaspora.

Jhumpa Lahiri's identity, taking into account of all her geographical affiliations since her birth, is contributed by four nations: India (ancestral roots), England (birthplace), America (immigration) and Italy (living by choice). Lahiri may not be a legal citizen to every nation she has been associated with but her "cultural citizenship" cuts across these territorial boundaries. The British-Australian-American interdisciplinary social scientist Toby Miller defines "cultural citizenship" as "[the] maintenance and development of cultural lineage through education, custom, language, and religion, and the positive acknowledgement of difference in and by the mainstream" (Miller 2). Thus, a person can be identified by their "cultural citizenship" apart from the pan-national identity of being a "legal citizen" of a nation. For a multicultural country like India, the homogenised approach to national identity often leads to the denial of the inherent diversities of the country and also leaves out many marginal cultures in the representation of the national identity. In such multicultural contexts, the cultural identity becomes important in determining the identity of a person. For a second-generation diaspora like the author, their cultural identity is not necessarily constrained just to the culture of the ancestral land. As they have grown up imbibing and internalising the culture of the host country and also that of their immigrant parents, their cultural make up is inevitably an integrated one. The cultural knowledge and experience of both the spaces contribute in the formation of their identity. However, such cultural interaction may not always have a smooth and coherent influence on the identity of the diaspora, especially the second-generation. It may result in a schizophrenic existence of the second-generation diaspora. Thus, they become what Stuart Hall terms as a "post-modern subject," "conceptualised as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity" (Hall 598). "Hell-Heaven" is one of the short stories in the collection titled *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) by Jhumpa Lahiri which gives a glance into the complex existence of an Indian Bengali expatriate family, comprising of a father (Shyamal), a mother (Aparna) and a daughter (Usha), in America. As this short story is narrated from the perspective of Usha, the dilemma of a second-generation diaspora for being an insider as well as an outsider to both cultures is reflected in her narration. Usha can be regarded as an insider as well as an outsider to both cultures because she is directly linked to both Indian and American cultures, yet there seems to be a lack of absolute belongingness in her attitude towards neither culture. This liminal position occupied by Usha seems to be a predicament for diaspora, especially for the later generations. She observes the peculiarities and uniqueness of being born in an Indian Bengal family amidst the mainstream American culture. A physical manifestation of this "inbetweenness" can be identified in her approach to both cultures. A need for a constant adjustment and shifting between cultures becomes a necessity for the young narrator to bring a balance between her private and public life. Within the walls of her house, she is expected to uphold the culture and tradition of her Indian Bengali parents; while beyond these walls,

there exists the American reality which the narrator has to constantly confront in the absence of her parents. No doubt she has been born to an Indian Bengali parents, but it is an undeniable fact that she is also a child of America. Moreover, her legal citizenship seems to be quite puzzling as she was born in Berlin where her father completed his training in microbiology and then shifted to America after accepting a position of a researcher at Mass General. Thus, besides her legal identity as a Person of Indian Origin (PIO), she is also directly associated with two other nations, Germany and America. It becomes crucial to analyse the problems that arise when the migrant parents fail to acknowledge the identity of their children acquired from the host country, which also forms an indispensable part of their existence.

“Hell-Heaven” provides the scope to study the issues related to the problematic identity of the second-generation diaspora like Usha. In the context of immigrant families, generational conflict and tension seem to be a recurring problem resulting from the immense difference in the cultural exposure and upbringing between the parents and their children. In the case of “Hell-Heaven,” the two geographical spaces, India and America which Lahiri is personally associated with, are culturally divergent to each other. In almost all her fiction, Jhumpa Lahiri predominantly deals with the immigration of Indian expatriates to America which took place during the late 1960s and 1970s, a historical period during which mass migrations of South Asians took place with the signing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 into law by the then American President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Indian society to which these first-generation migrants have come from was to a great extent traditional, and not liberal and open-minded as the America society. Even Usha’s parents Shyamal and Aparna belong to this milieu of first-generation Indian migrants. It is quite expected for a person coming from such traditional background to undergo a cultural shock when they are confronted with an extremely contradictory American culture. This cultural shock seems to act as a warning for a necessity to preserve and protect their ancestral identity. The fear of being assimilated into the mainstream culture is also reflected in the manner of Shyamal and Aparna’s parenting. They are projected as over-protective parents, especially Aparna, who consciously try to safeguard their American born daughter from apparently being corrupted by the American culture. The first instance for Aparna’s outright rejection of American value system and her desire to pass down her reservation for Bengali culture to her daughter is hinted by her objection to buy an issue of *Archie*, a globally popular American comic book series which revolves around the lives of American teenagers, for Usha. However, the manifestation of the difference in preference and choice of the Indian born parents and American born daughter is lucidly projected through the tropes of clothes by Jhumpa Lahiri.

Like most diaspora writers, Jhumpa Lahiri adopts the narrative technique of nostalgic writing in “Hell Heaven.” However, the nostalgic feeling expressed by the narrator is for Pranab Chakraborty and not for the distant homeland India. However, if interpreted symbolically, Pranab seems to symbolise the homeland for Usha’s family; and similarly, Usha’s family symbolises the homeland for Pranab. Human relationship forged between members of common descent in a foreign land seems to help them in mapping the homeland for one another. The temporal distance allows the narrator to objectively look back at the

circumstances which made her family's relation with Pranab to develop quickly and then to disintegrate eventually. Usha recalls the fateful day when Pranab Chakraborty, "a fellow Bengali from Calcutta" (Lahiri 60) made entry into their lives for the first time in the early seventies and within no time how they began to consider him as a member of the family; Pranab became Pranab Kaku (uncle) to Usha and he addressed her father as Shyamal Da (brother) and her mother as Boudi (older brother's wife). Pranab who was new to the country was so delighted to see the Bengali mother-daughter duo on the streets of Cambridge that he followed them for hours around the streets. The most obvious and tangible cultural elements which made it possible for him to connect with Aparna was the traditional Bengali attire which she was wearing. It is through her dressing that he could locate her cultural root which was the same as his. Here, Pranab's instantaneous affinity towards Usha and her mother is developed primarily because of the common cultural origin. A fellow Bengali amidst the numerous people is being recognised because

[Aparna] was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women, and a common Tangail sari, and had a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair, and full round face and large dark eyes that are so typical of Bengali women. He noticed the two or three safety pins were fastened to the thin gold bangles that were behind the red and white ones, which she would use to replace a missing hook on a blouse or to draw a string through a petticoat at a moment's notice, a practice he associated strictly with his mother and sisters and aunts in Calcutta. (Lahiri 61)

Jhumpa Lahiri gives a detailed array of Aparna's clothing which is typical of an Indian Bengali married women. In the Indian Bengali culture, *shaka pola* (a pair of white and red bangles) becomes a part of explicit culture as it is a symbolic cultural marker for married Bengali women. Lahiri's skilful usage of this stereotypical image of a Bengali married woman foreshadows Aparna's restrained outlook towards American culture. Her dressing shows that she has successfully kept herself untainted by America. In this case, Usha and her mother's cultural identity, which is visibly expressed through Usha's dressing, becomes more pronounced than her national identity. The cultural marker like clothes becomes the obvious indicator of her location within India, which is a nation of diverse cultures. Numerous immigrants from different regions and states of India live in America and many may have similar physical features like Aparna, yet Pranab is able to single out Usha and her mother as Bengalis because of Aparna's attire. Thus, clothing becomes the obvious visible cultural material which helps in concretising a person's cultural identity even after being geographically displaced from their cultural roots.

Aparna's decision of cladding herself in Bengali traditional attire can be seen as a political stance of asserting one's identity in a foreign land. For an Indian woman migrant like Aparna who has come to America just as wives or companions to their expatriate husband, it is a difficult task to connect herself to a space whose culture has no convergence with the culture they have been born and brought up in. Physical cultural materials like clothes and also food seem to serve as a buffer to the nostalgic tension suffered by Aparna. As a grown up girl, Usha now realises that her mother was in love with Pranab Kaku as she

never got the kind of affection and attention from her husband which she received from Pranab. Like Pranab, Shyamal never complimented her cooking or listen to her stories of West Bengal. Besides clothes, another prominent tangible cultural element found in the narrative is food. If Aparna's Bengali attire is the reason of Pranab being attracted to Usha's family, then it is the Bengali food which forged his kinship with the family. In fact, Theresa W. Devasahayam, in her essay "Forging Kinship with Food: The Experience of South Indians in Malaysia" (2008) points out that "In Indian thinking, food is regarded as a tool for forging kinship" (163). However, the special bonding which Aparna shared with Pranab started disintegrating with the entry of Deborah, an American, into his life. Usha now understands why her mother initially disliked Deborah and did not accept her as a member of the family like Pranab. She discouraged her daughter to address her as Deborah Kakima turning her into an aunt like she turned Pranab into an uncle by addressing him as Pranab Da. Aparna's cynical attitude towards Deborah was not just because of her jealousy but also because Deborah was an American. She had a prejudiced notion that it would be Deborah who would leave Pranab but on the contrary, "It was he who had strayed, falling in love with a married Bengali woman, destroying two families in the process" (Lahiri 81). Jhumpa Lahiri introduces the character of Deborah just like Aparna by giving a description of her physical appearance and Western attire from the point of view of Usha,

Deborah was very tall, taller than both my parents and nearly as tall as Pranab Kaku. She wore her long brass-colored hair center-parted, as my mother did, but it was gathered into a low ponytail instead of a braid, or it was spilled messily over her shoulders and down her back in a way that my mother considered indecent. She wore small silver spectacles and not a trace of makeup, and she studied philosophy. (Lahiri 68)

Jhumpa Lahiri shows the difference in cultural backgrounds between the two women, Aparna and Deborah, through the detailed description of their clothing and physical appearance. In contrast to Aparna's repulsive attitude towards Deborah, Usha had a liking for Deborah. Usha recalls,

I fell in love with Deborah, the way young girls often fall in love with women who are not their mothers. I loved her serene gray eyes, the ponchos and denim wrap skirts and sandals she wore, her straight hair that let me manipulate into all sorts of silly styles. I longed for her casual appearance; my mother insisted whenever there was a gathering that I wear one of my ankle-length, faintly Victorian dresses, which she referred to as maxis, and have party hair, which meant taking a strand from either side of my head and joining them in a barrette at the back. (Lahiri 69)

Here, Jhumpa Lahiri uses the trope of clothing to describe Usha's attraction towards Deborah. Usha's recollection of her attraction to Deborah's dressing style clearly indicates her cultural preference, at least in terms of clothing, which differs from her mother. This cultural conflict between mother and daughter is expressed in terms of difference in taste of clothes. The over-protective nature of the mother is expressed through the choice of clothes

which the mother expects her daughter to wear. Usha remembers her disappointment with her mother for forcing her to wear a salwar kameez for the Thanksgiving party at the Chakraborty's home. She felt embarrassed in front of Deborah's American parents, siblings and their families because she thought they would assume her to be more Bengali than American. Besides the similarity in the taste of fashion, Usha had many common interests and topics to talk about with Deborah unlike her mother. They could talk in English, a language which she felt she could express herself more easily than Bengali, about books which Deborah was aware of. Usha remembers Deborah gifting her Grimm's *Fairy Tales* and Nancy Drews which she would never expect from either of her parents. If Shyamal and Aparna's bonding with Pranab is a consequence of the common cultural knowledge and experience, then Usha's bonding with Deborah also roots from the cultural conditioning which Usha had received from her American school and friends.

Usha's recollection of her childhood discloses her increasingly estranging relationship with her mother. This generational gap between Usha and her mother is obviously contributed by the difference in cultural upbringing. Though she has crossed the international boundaries, ironically her identity still remains restricted to the four walls of domesticity. Aparna continues to conform to the role of a wife, a mother and a caretaker. Unlike Shyamal, Usha, Pranab and Deborah, Jhumpa Lahiri makes no mention of the educational qualification of Aparna. The lack of education can be a major factor in her husband's indifference to her existence. Usha's narration presents a picture of a family whose members live in their separate and secluded cocoons under the same roof. However, with growing age and maturity, Usha seems to come to a certain degree of reconciliation with her mother's loneliness and tries to emotionally reconnect with her mother. In fact, the ending of the narrative hints the bridging of the gap between the mother and the daughter. They seem to have become confidant for each other, to whom they could disclose their deepest secrets about their unrequited love and men who had broken their hearts.

In conclusion, it can be said that Jhumpa Lahiri skilfully utilises the semiotic significance of clothes in the construction of her characters, both the Indian Bengalis and Americans. Through the analysis of imageries and tropes of clothes present in the short story "Hell-Heaven", it is found that clothes serve as prominent markers of culture to which the characters belong. They help in the assertion and affirmation of the cultural identity of the characters present in the narrative. They also help in concretising the cultural identity of the first-generation diaspora like Aparna in the absence of the ancestral land amidst the host culture. The difference in the attitude of the migrant Bengalis towards the traditional attire reflects their varying degree of affinity towards the culture of the ancestral land. Aparna's strict adherence to Bengali traditional attire seems to be the only way of staying untainted by the mainstream culture and connecting herself to her ancestral land. Shyamal, on the other hand, maintains an attitude of indifference to both cultures with regard to Bengali clothes or Bengali food prepared by his wife. Usha represents those children of immigrant parents who are torn between the constraints of parental expectation and obligation and individual choice. Usha's confused cultural identity is vividly reflected through her clothes; the difference in the

choice of clothes is shown as one of the main reasons for disagreement between Usha and her mother during her childhood.

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