

Lahiri's Womanist Maternity in Unaccustomed Earth

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Like Ogunyemi, who wrote that household roles both subjugated and empowered Nigerian women, Jhumpa Lahiri manifests a curious way of attributing power to the women in her fiction. By placing her female characters in traditional roles such as nearly silent, often jobless housewives and/or mothers Lahiri displays, through the inner monologue and narrative of her female characters, their impact on other characters' consciousnesses, and their communal bonding in short, their great power. These women use their constant re-evaluation of cross-cultural, Indian-American mores, often developed by implementing maternity, to improve their lives and the lives of those around them. In short, despite situating her female characters as outwardly powerless in Western society, Lahiri reveals their inner adaptability yet not over-assimilatory nature. Such was the case with Ashima and Gogol.

Lahiri positions the heroine of the title short story to her newest collection *Unaccustomed Earth* similarly to Ashima. Ruma, a Bengali-American woman and former lawyer, is a stay-at-home-mom, expecting the birth of her second child, at the outset of her narrative. As she raises her son, Akash, a toddler throughout the entirety of the story (unlike Gogol who grows to adulthood in *The Namesake*), she pays host to her newly widowed father, and mothers both Akash, her father and herself both physically and culturally. This maternity originates through, aptly enough, her own ruminations based on the contemplation of her late mother's Bengali-American views, in addition to her own and her American husband's own experiences in America.

Thinking of her father's gardening in unaccustomed soil, often late into the evening, Ruma is reminded of her Bengali mother's reluctance to eat before first serving her husband, "Her mother would complain, having to keep dinner waiting until nine at night. 'Go ahead and eat,' Ruma would say, but her mother, trained all her life to serve her husband first, would

never consider such a thing" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 16). Thinking, later in the narrative, of her decision to remain jobless and her father's lack of support for this decision, Ruma concludes, "Her mother would have understood her decision, would have been understanding and proud" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 36). These contemplations of maternal values result in Ruma's eventual decision to accept her father's new post-marital relationship. In a moment that fulfills Lahiri's message of the complexity both cultural and emotional of a woman's cross-cultural, vernacular response, Lahiri presents Ruma sending her father's accidentally left behind postcard to his new girlfriend into the mail. The significance of the postcard is that it both presents the possibility for Ruma's admitted acceptance of the new relationship and, at the same time, presents the possibility of failure the postcard Ruma mails may never arrive.

Given the optimism of both Ruma's story and the narrative of Gogol, it seems that Lahiri's optimism for maternity at an individual and communal level is high. But careful analysis of Ruma's story recalls that her father's maternity was, unlike Ashoke's, quite limited. And the concluding and longest story in Lahiri's new collection adds to a sharp contradiction of Lahiri's earlier optimism.

Indeed, the most potent narrative of maternity in Lahiri's *Unaccustomed Earth* is the tragic narrative of maternity lost, both physically and culturally, in "Hema and Kaushik." Unlike Gogol, who is often surrounded by a backdrop of lush multicultural and maternal success, Kaushik, the protagonist of Lahiri's novella is surrounded by intercultural and maternal loss and destruction. Gogol's backdrop of multitudinous delicious 'foreign' restaurants and markets in which he daily strolls in *The Namesake*, even the French cuisine over which he and Moushumi fall in love is greatly opposite to the corpses and bloodshed of the world Kaushik daily encounters. A photographer of international disasters, Kaushik

routinely captures images of international failure at hybridity, postcolonialism, international diplomacy, and more.

Hema catches a glimpse of the horror that fills Kaushik's lens everyday:

There were countless images, terrible things, things she'd read about in the newspaper and never had to think about again. Buses blasted apart by bombs, bodies on stretchers, young boys throwing stones. (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed* 315)

Readers, eyeing Lahiri's global fallout, can only conclude that the young boys, rapt in vandalism, are, if even just for the moment, devoid of maternity.

Kaushik has been led down this path of life by the death of his mother, Parul, and the void of her maternity, which he and his father could not fill. After her death and his father's remarriage, Kaushik, funded by his father, takes off for an isolated tour of the East Coast of the United States, exploring deathlike scenes reminding him of his mother and her death. But Kaushik's loss of maternity is not simultaneous with the death of his mother. It should be noted that she provided little cultural maternity from the beginning. Her love of materialism, articulated by Hema and her family as American, was wholly developed in India, where her cultural maternity and that maternity she could have bestowed to her son could have been nurtured. And Kaushik's father, who might have filled the void of maternity after Parul's death (as Ashoke reinforced cultural maternity to Gogol), chose to exclude Kaushik from his life by remarrying quickly and to a stranger after Parul's death.

Kaushik's own potential for mothering himself and others is laid forth in this section of the narrative as well. Although he quickly gains a special sibling bond with the two daughters, Rupa and Piu, of his father's new wife, Chitra, who have also lost a parent, teaching these girls how to handle American money, taking them to museums, an Aquarium, and Dunkin Donuts, the connection's limits are soon revealed. Just days after declaring, "I felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not deny the things that bound us together", Kaushik observes that a need for defined connection, a need for cultural maternity, is

constantly resurfacing despite the connection he and his stepsisters share and have built. "We were all waiting for my father, waiting for him to return and explain, if only by his presence, why we were sitting together drinking tea", Kaushik thinks. But paternity is not necessarily maternity. Not all fathers or mothers for that matter uphold womanist maternity. And Kaushik's father, upon his return, fulfills no maternal role to his son. He erects a totally impersonal Christmas tree that shows no remnants of cultural or other genuineness with his late wife, nor does he project any potential for his future family onto this object. It sits, generic and meaningless in their living room. Upon hearing that his request that Kaushik take a picture of his family is denied, because Kaushik forgot his camera, his father's disappointment resurfaces in an exemplification of lost maternity, "That look of irritated disappointment, the one that had appeared the day my mother died, and was missing now that he'd married Chitra, passed briefly across my father's face". In short, the loss of maternity Kaushik feels is still irreplaceable to others (here, Kaushik's father) and Kaushik, a physical reminder of that lost maternity, recalls his father's disappointment best.