

Indian Diaspora and Liminality in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Only Goodness*

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Abstract

“Only Goodness” is the fourth story of Jhumpa Lahiri’s celebrated short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). Like the other stories of the collection, this story too, deals with liminality or “in-betweenness” being faced by the Indian diaspora abroad. The story particularly deals with the children of the Indian diaspora in the form of Sudha and Rahul and situates them in liminality to show their resilience and vulnerability which define their subject positions there. Lahiri, through Sudha, aims at telling a success story of liminality on the one hand; and on the other, through Rahul, tells a failed story of liminality. The text highlights displacement, transnationality, alienation, intergenerational clash, uncertainty, unsettlement and the like that characterize their subjectivity in liminality. A post-colonial reading of the text coupled with diaspora studies illuminates the liminal subjectivity of the Indian diaspora narrated in the text.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, *Only Goodness*, Liminality, Indian diaspora, displacement, transnationality, alienation, uncertainty

Introduction

“Only Goodness”, a constituent story of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), is found to be resonant with liminality or “in-betweenness” of Indian diaspora. The story attempts at exploring the liminal subject position of the Indian diaspora with a domestic setting that covers two generations – parents and children. It projects liminality to be an ineluctable reality of diasporic life which exposes the resilience and vulnerability of Indian diasporic subjectivity.

Discussion and Interpretation

In “Only Goodness” liminality seems to find its manifestation in the plight of the parents and their children vis a vis their career abroad. The parents, being the first generation immigrants, struggle a lot to build their career, and giving birth to children Sudha and Rahul in two different countries viz., England and America. Their upbringing and career, particularly of Sudha which spans England and America, are among most testing phases of their diasporic life. The father who migrated from India to make career in England, and then in the U.S, is

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Pankaj Luchan Gogoi, Indian Diaspora and Liminality in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Only Goodness*

142

representative of the first generation immigrant, is portrayed as a successful diaspora for his resilience and diligence in liminality as evident in consistency of his career and rearing a family there. He does everything to make his family happy, and particularly in respect of his children does everything to secure a good future there. The children, on the other hand, are portrayed both as successful and unsuccessful depending on their own nature and personality.

The lives of Sudha and Rahul's parents appear to be liminal given their experience of both "blessing and portent" (Lahiri, 135). Sudha's father along with her mother, in order to build his career, struggles a lot both in England and the U.S. When they came to England in the 1960s, the most noteworthy challenge that they faced is racial discrimination. The rentals at that time did not open rented house to the non-white people much to the woes of their parents. Moreover, the white house owners did not even let pregnant non-white immigrants to go for labor at home. This situation is a virtual double whammy that troubled them immeasurably at London. It was only after their meeting with Mr. Pal, a Bengali landlord who provided his parents asylum that they heaved a sigh of relief as it was exactly at that time, a white old lady, the owner of their previous house, had not allowed Sudha's birth at her home.

Her parents told her that half the rentals in London in the sixties said WHITES ONLY, and the combination of being Indian and pregnant limited her parents to the point where her father considered sending her mother back to India to give birth, until they met Mr. Pal. To Sudha this story was like an episode out of a Greek myth or the Bible, rich with blessing and portent, marking her family as survivors in strange intolerant seas. (135)

Their second child Rahul is born in America. This time around their problem is more acute given their loneliness in America which is a new country for them. There are few Bengali acquaintances, and hence no one is there at hospital at the time of labour. This condition reminds us the traumatic experience of labor of Ashima in *The Namesake*. It is also an unforgettable memory for six year old Sudha who recollects the trouble of her parents during Rahul's birth, and it is, indeed, the "first sustained memory" (133) of her life. This memory also serves as a trauma of displacement at a very early stage of her life. She remembers the trouble of his father as he has to take her to Boston hospital all alone, and there is no one to attend to her mother. Sudha herself faces many problems as she is left at a party of her parents' Bengali friends in Peabody much to her annoyance and disappointment:

The host and hostess did not have children of their own. Sudha had slept on a cot in a spare room containing no permanent furniture other than an ironing board and a closet devoted to cleaning supplies. In the morning there were no Frosted Flakes for her to eat, only toast with margarine, and it was then, during that restrained and disappointing adult breakfast, that the phone rang with news of her brother's arrival. (134)

The liminal subject positions of the parents are also shown through the perspectives of their children Sudha and Rahul. Sudha notices correctly the deep trouble in which their migration to England took place; for, it was a time “when immigration was still an adventure, living with paraffin heaters, seeing snow for the first time.” (138). Both of them were first generation immigrants, and certainly they faced innumerable problems in getting well along with the foreign land. The “in-betweenness” of the parents’ existence can be seen in their life that is rather insipid. The situatedness of their life in liminality that makes their marriage a “perplexing fact” (137) characterized by insipidity:

Thanks to Rahul there was also someone else to witness the perplexing fact of her parents’ marriage. It was neither happy nor unhappy, and the lack of emotion in either extreme was what upset Sudha most. She would have understood quarrels, she believed she would even have understood divorce. She always hoped some sign of love would manifest itself; the only things that consoled her were a few pictures taken during their London years. (137)

The displacement of the parents is found to be more intense in the U.S. Their shift to the U.S situates them in such a condition that they find it hard to negotiate their living in the city Wayland. Things are not same as those of London, and hence they are to depend a lot upon their children, particularly Sudha. Their inconvenience in foreign land can be deemed from the fact that they find everything in Wayland perplexing. In London, her mother kept herself busy in certificate course. Within a very short period they had to pass through various situations of two different countries. They have come to the U.S after four years of stay in London. They have not voluntarily come from London to Wayland, Massachusetts, the U.S.A; but it is occasioned by their father’s transfer from Badger to Raytheon. On this displacement they carried “no evidence of their years in London,” (135). It implies that they still remain very much Indian and not British anyway. In their cross Atlantic migration, they have not even carried baby Sudha’s toys, clothing, and other belongings that they have gathered in the U.K except the family photos clicked by their Bengali landlord Mr. Pal. These are the photographs that Shudha produces at her autobiography presentation at grade school of Wayland much to the amusement of her friends. Interestingly, their mother has psychological connection i.e., English biscuits and brassieres which moderately defines her taste for foreign things –“her mother’s fondness for the McVite’s biscuits she ate every morning with tea and her lifelong belief in the quality of British brassieres, which she asked friends in the UK to mail her every so often.” (135-136). On the other hand, their arrival in the U.S is a kind of shock, and they find it rather inconvenient to cope up with the American way of life. Therefore, the parents start depending upon their children for guidance:

Wayland was the shock. Suddenly they were stuck, her parents aware that they faced a life sentence of being foreign. In London her mother had been working toward a certificate in Montessori education, but in America she did not work, did not drive. She put on twenty pounds after Rahul was born, and her father put away his mod suits and shopped at Sears. In Wayland they became passive, wary, the rituals of small-town New England more confounding than negotiating two of the world's largest cities. They relied on their children, on Sudha especially. (138)

Dependence on the elder child Sudha stems from the fact that she has more command over American English than her parents. Rahul is six years junior to her, and “never considered it his duty to help their parents in this way.” (138), hence, the parents talk more frequently to her. Besides her fluency in English, she has better understanding of American way of life which she acquires because of her socialization in America at school:

It was she who had to explain to her father that he had to gather up the leaves in bags, not just drag them with his rake to the woods opposite the house. She, with her perfect English, who called the repair department at Lechmere to have their appliances serviced. (138)

This obvious dependence of her parents on Sudha reflects the first generation immigrants' difficulty in getting well accustomed to the U.S life which bespeaks of their liminality whereas the second generation's ease with it shows their acculturation into the mainstream culture. Rahul's unresponsive attitude thereof may be read in two ways. On the one hand, he is too assimilated into the U.S culture to believe his parents' inability to do so because of his birth and complete upbringing in the U.S, unlike Sudha who was born in London. On the other hand, given his being a second generation diaspora he is completely oblivious and nonchalant to the in-betweenness of his parents which cripples them in starting a life in the U.S.

Sudha's co-operation and responsiveness to their parents' time and again proves that in liminality she is epitome of only goodness. Later, she continues to be so in every walk of her life viz., education, profession, relation with Rahul, her husband Roger and their son Neel. On the other hand, Rahul's insensitivity, irresponsibility, and negligence portray him as figure of only badness which ultimately leads to the spoiling of his career and life, even spoils the relation with his parents and Sudha. The callous attitude of Rahul towards his parents' projects him to be totally unconcerned and “impermeable” (138) about the pangs of his parents who try all the possible way to build a life in two foreign countries, and who have showered more love and care to him than Sudha:

Rahul was impermeable to that aspect of their life as well. “No one dragged them here,” he would say. “Baba left India to get rich, and Ma married him because she had nothing else to do.” That was Rahul, always aware of the family’s weaknesses, never sparing Sudha from the things she least wanted to face. (138)

The liminal subject position can be harnessed towards excellence is shown by Sudha. A girl, born in the U.K, takes education in the U.S; and again, comes to the U.K for education and career. In the U.S she takes major in two subjects – economics and mathematics, and gets Master’s degree in international politics. Her quest of learning continues with her pursuit of another Master’s degree in economics in London School of Economics. Rahul does not like her plan of having two master’s degrees; but she explains him that developmental economics offered by LSE is one of the best programmes of the world, and it will ultimately help her pursuing her aim of serving in NGO. Earlier her parents, too, had an apprehension on her flying to England for education, and had not approved her admission into Oxford to pursue a junior year. But this time around they endorse her decision:

Her parents hadn’t allowed her to do a junior year abroad at Oxford, telling her then that she was too young to live in a foreign country alone. But now they were excited by the prospect of Sudha going to London, where they’d first lived after getting married and where Sudha had been born. Talking about visiting and reconnecting with old friends. (132-133)

In her profession as well, she seems to be a very successful professional. After coming out of LSE she fulfills her aim of working in an NGO that aims at poor countries for promoting micro loans. She through her diligence and performance has become a matter of pride for her parents – “Sudha was among those successful children now, her collection of higher degrees framed and filling up her parents’ upstairs hall.” (151) Even in her personal life too, she wishes to have a person of her own choice that underlines her independence in her liminal subject position in England. She finds Roger to be a man having “the same strain of competence she possessed.” (147). He has a PhD in history, works as an editor of an art magazine. He also comes of a humble background as his father is only an overseas worker of Singer sewing machines. His romantic behavior towards her, his well-understanding of her, his birth in India, his habit of drinking moderately like her, are some of the key factors that brings him closer to her. Besides, she prefers her as a life partner despite her knowledge of his previous marriage with a girl with whom he does not live now. Even Sudha’s parents, in their liminal existence, like Roger because of his birth in India and harboring his life in England. The birth and career of Roger in two different countries serve as similar case of liminality for Sudha’s parents, and hence they readily approve of the marriage:

They accepted that she and Roger planned to have a registry wedding in London, that they were willing to have only a reception in Massachusetts, that Roger had been previously married, that he and Sudha had a fourteen-year gap. They approved of his academic qualifications, his ability, thanks to his wisely invested inheritance, to buy a house for himself and Sudha in Kilburn. It helped that he'd been born in India, that he was English and not American, drinking tea instead of coffee, and saying "zed" not "zee," superficial things that allowed her parents to relate to him. (152)

The flexibility in Sudha's character in her liminal subjectivity lies in the fact that she would like to settle in the U.K where she feels "an instinctive connection to London" (144). She does not show any sign of disappointment in being remaining or settling on the other side of the Atlantic without the parents and brother. She is very happy in London, gets her degree from her cherished institute LSE, and finally immerses herself in the work of NGO. This success of Sudha reveals her comfort and survival instinct in liminality.

Although she seems to be flexible to the environment of the U.K; it does not mean that she does not have any relation with the parents. Indeed, the cross Atlantic flight brings her closer to her parents than ever before. This is conspicuous when she feels the urge to speak to her parents about her relation with Roger and their subsequent settlement in Britain – "She had come to tell her family about Roger, to tell them she planned to move permanently to London and marry him," (150). It clearly shows that her liminal existence in far-away country does not make her remote from her kin; instead, it brings them closer. This is evident even in early days in London when she starts studying at LSE:

In spite of the ocean that now separated her from her parents, she felt closer to them, but she also felt free, for the first time in her life, of her family's weight. Still, she could not drink anymore without thinking of Rahul, always conscious that the second pint she drained, satisfied at the end of a night out, would not have enough for him (144-145).

On the other hand, Rahul seems to be a case of complete disorientation in the U.S. His parents are more focused on him, and facilitated everything for his betterment. They have gone for documentation of his life with photographs clicked at the time of sleeping, bathing etc., and put them into an album. Given their liminal existence and its concomitant inconveniences they even provide him with a car when he goes to Cornell for higher studies after having graduated from high school of Wayland. They justify presenting a car to him at college level "as a necessity for life in Ithaca." (129). Since his childhood he has been provided with everything that a child needs to the extent that even Sudha gets envied with him. Initially described as "precocious" (130), he turns out to be "a blot, a failure" (151). Rahul is an irony for the parents in their liminal existence; they pinned huge expectation in him, but he appears as complete failure and

disaster for the family. His performance at Cornell is on the decline. In the first semester he gets B grade, and then in second semester he gets C. He gives up his subjects - biology and organic chemistry and takes up English literature. Along with poor performance, he also develops some extremely bad habits like addiction to alcohol, bunking the classes, extravagance, watching movies in class and the like. Even at Cornell, Ithaca, Rahul is unable to sustain his former “precocious” (130) self, away from his parents and sister. He is situated in liminal space within the U.S with a change of place for education from Wayland, Massachusetts to Ithaca where he goes for degeneration. His utter failure to negotiate his own career and life in liminal subject position is best noticed by his father who has the experience of struggling and shaping life in three countries – India, England and the U.S.A, the countries of three different continents. Rahul’s father notices him in his liminal existence in Ithaca, and says to Sudha, “He is floundering.” (140); and the father who invests a lot in his son and who himself is an epitome of success has “no patience for failure, and indulgences” (140), that too, in a country where success is deemed as a dream. All these demerits, especially his habit of bunking the classes ultimately resulted in his dismissal from the prestigious Cornell University much to the shame, agony and embarrassment of the family. After this debacle in Ithaca, Rahul remains at home spending his days watching television. The parents sell his car, and hence he has kept indoors. Ithaca debacle debars him from challenging his parents like before – “That energy was missing now” (150). It is Rahul, the second generation migrant, who makes their parents hard-earned position in liminality abominable, embarrassing, and intolerable:

For a while her parents told their friends that he was taking a leave of absence and then that he was in the process of transferring to BU. “Rahul needs a city in order to thrive,” they said; but he never applied to other schools. They told people Rahul was looking for a job, and then the lie became more elaborate, and Rahul had a job, a consulting job from home, when in fact he stayed home all day doing nothing. Their mother, who had always hoped her children would live under her roof, was now ashamed that this was the case. (150-151)

Rahul’s case is a testimony to the fact that displacement from home; and liminality in other places is not negotiable to all. Even money and good academic institute cannot guarantee one’s success in liminal space unless he himself is capable of dealing with his liminal subject position. Simply speaking, success in liminality depends on person’s individual capacity or resilience like his father and his sister Sudha who pass through a series of challenges to define their identity in foreign land.

Both the cases of Sudha and Rahul show the uncertainty vis a vis children’s career experienced by parents in liminal existence in foreign land. The parents, who feel relaxed after having witnessed the initial achievement of Sudha and Rahul, become very upset about Rahul’s

failure. Earlier when Sudha is in Philadelphia and Rahul is in Cornell, the parents think that they have successfully raised their children in America. They are compared to other successful Bengali students in America, and they proudly exclaim “Our job is done” (129). The concern and obsession with the children’s career by the immigrant parents reveal another dimension of their subjectivity as noticed by Ed Minus, “first generation parents are inevitably autocratic in their ambition for offspring.” (Minus Ixxxv)

But their expectations are shattered with Rahul’s failure, alcoholism, deviance, and finally disappearance from home after Sudha’s wedding party where he has fiercely fell out with his father. His disorientation with his parents is evident in the letter he has sent from Columbus, Ohio that is addressed to no one; but makes his stand clear:

“Don’t bother looking for me here,” he’d written, “I’m only spending the night. I don’t want to hear from any of you. Please leave me alone.” (Lahiri 158)

Through the characters of Sudha and Rahul, Lahiri actually tries to show the success and failures of immigrants’ children in liminality. The children’s performance, to a great extent, determines the family’s psychological affiliation to the model minority, i.e., the same ethnic community like Asian Americans, or Indian Americans. That is why, there is persistent anxiety in parents over the prospective pride in or shame on their children’s career, and this anxiety characterizes Sudha’s parents’ subjectivity in America:

The prospect of model minority is a source of anxiety for some of her fictional immigrants who face psychological dilemmas, whilst others, capable of adjusting to the host land, tend to dwell in the interstices of cultures. Lahiri’s tales, therefore, juxtapose vulnerability and resilience in everyday life, bringing to the fore an aesthetics of neurosis as a way to criticise socio-economic pressures. (Monaco 161)

Rahul’s arrest for his drinking seems to expose the liminal subject position of his mother as secondary immigrant. According to the U.S law, he is so underage that his driving in drinking state leads to his arrest. His mother, on the other hand, thinks that he has been arrested for being Indian. She tries to give the case of his son’s arrest a racial color much to the anger of Sudha. Being a considerate girl, Sudha is aware of fault caused by Rahul, and feels rather embarrassed with her mother’s ignorance of certain basic facts of the country in which they are living. Even their father is aware of the truth about Rahul’s arrest, and so he observes silence:

Sudha pitied her mother, pitied her refusal to accommodate such an unpleasant and alien fact, her need to blame America and its laws instead of her son. She sensed that her father understood, but he refused to engage in the conversation (Lahiri143).

Sudha's stand against her mother's racial consideration is actually part of the second generations' "racial disavowals" (Koshy, 366) which underlines the parent's failure to transcend their essential view on India and America. The oppositional vision of the two countries is actually a major cause of intergenerational clash in the story. Sudha's insightful observation thereto shows her taking a very balanced position which defines her cosmopolitan subjectivity:

Her parents had always been blind to the things that plagued their children: being teased at school for the color of their skin or for the funny things their mother occasionally put into their lunch boxes, potato curry sandwiches that tinted Wonderbread green. What could there possibly be to be unhappy about? Her parents would have thought. "Depression" was foreign to them, an American thing. In their opinion their children were immune from the hardships and injustices they had left behind in India, as if the inoculations the pediatrician had given Sudha and Rahul when they were babies guaranteed them an existence free of suffering. (Lahiri143-144)

All through the story, Sudha is portrayed as symbol of "only goodness" for her parents, brother, husband, child Neel, and everyone she meets. Her goodness is also found her success in academics, building a cherished career, and thus living up to the expectation of parents. Her celebration of the thanksgiving at her college days and annaprasan after the birth of Neel shows her hybrid character as well. Because of her goodness in character she is fully successful in her liminal subject position setting a glorious precedent for other displaced people. She has been good to her brother Rahul since his childhood. She always stands by him at his hour of crisis, never scolds him for his deviance and failures. It is this goodness of her that he writes a letter to her after he has disappeared from his house and stopped all ties with the parents. In the letter, Rahul talks about his present condition of life, his living with Elena along with her daughter, his being apologetic for everything, his desire to meet her, and his status quo with his parents. Sudha readily writes to him informing him of her attaining motherhood and expresses her desire to meet him. At this point of time, Sudha starts a completely new life with her job, husband and the baby Neel in her liminal subject position in England. When Rahul arrives there, she and Roger do everything to make him happy. Being a considerate girl, she knows the plight of dislocated families, and hence she opens her door to her deviant brother to strike a balance between "natal and alternatal families" (Dennihy 240). But much to her surprise and anger, Rahul has not been changed. He is incorrigible, and a symbol of only badness. This comes to Sudha's notice when he asks Sudha and Roger to go for movie after having promised to take care of little Neel in their absence. Contrary to their expectation, Rahul drinks a lot, and falls asleep leaving the baby

dangerously in the bathtub. This incident is a sufficient proof of his innate badness and incorrigibility which ultimately forces Sudha to snap all ties with him permanently.

Sudha is beginning a new life in England through sheer hard work in academics and career. Her endeavors to promote microloans to poor countries through NGO, indeed spreads her goodness to humanity at large. It also shows her capability to operate on global scale with the full enjoyment of liminal subject position. Besides, at personal level she has a competent husband Roger to add meaning to her life in liminality. The birth of their son Neel makes her life more meaningful as mother to whom she is the symbol of “only goodness” (Lahiri 173). Neel completes the lives of Sudha and Roger, and they both do not wish to take the risk of allowing an anathema like Rahul to continue his spoiling misdeeds in their family. For, he has never become a good son, brother, brother-in-law, and finally he has failed to become a good uncle. He is complete opposite to Sudha, and hence becomes a discouraging example of liminality. Sudha and Rahul, through their resilience and vulnerability, in their liminal subjectivity, fit into what Angelo Monaco observes about aesthetics of signifying neurosis:

At the heart of Lahiri’s fiction there is a vision of neurosis that emerges from the failure to assimilate. Her characters seem to challenge narratives of wholesomeness, generating empathy in reader’s affective response. On one hand, Lahiri exposes neurotic symptoms of vulnerability in characters who face paralysis, mutism, repetition compulsion and depression, thus offering no hope of redemption. On the other, her macro-text charts the potential benefits for those who linger over the in-between shuttling physically and imaginatively between the two worlds (Monaco 161).

Conclusion

“Only Goodness” offers a rich portrayal of second generation Indian diaspora subjectivity in America. The text situates them in liminality marked by opportunity and uncertainty to reinforce the need of resilience to survive in it, and at the same time also exposes the vulnerability that leads one to utter predicament. The text serves as a testimony to the ineluctable uncertainty and unsettlement of liminal life which characterizes the diasporic existence in today’s world.

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