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From Roots to Rhizomes: Hybrid, Diasporic Identities in Hema and Kaushik

Rahman analyzes diasporic Indian characters from Jhumpa Lahiri's book of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*. Focusing on two characters, Hema and Kaushik, Rahman draws out themes of displacement, genealogy and gender to demonstrate the conflicts that arise through hyphenated identities. An earlier version of this paper was produced for the course *South Asian Literature and Culture* (HND 2700) at York University and won the York Centre for Asian Research's Undergraduate Asian Diaspora Essay Award.

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The Greek word “diaspora” refers to the dispersion of seeds, the sowing of new life into unfamiliar grounds. In contemporary diaspora studies, the term describes all of the individuals who have, either by choice or by force, left the earth in which both their ancestors and they were born for a new home in a new land. This phenomenon has become common in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world where a large number of individuals leave their ancestral land and start anew on “unaccustomed earth.” In leaving their motherland, the diaspora shoots off in different directions, away from their roots only to grow like the rhizome, “in the heart of a tree, the hollow of a root, the crook of a branch” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 15). Even though they are not linked to a particular set of roots, their centres and identities themselves become fluid. Thus, the diaspora redefines its own unique form that contains within itself both the touches of its roots and of a new identity, along with glimmers of both gains and losses. It becomes its own hybrid that lives despite being broken, torn between two existences.

Similarly, in Jhumpa Lahiri’s book of short stories, *Unaccustomed Earth*,¹ the characters grapple with belonging, family and relationships as they construct their identities. Like ginger, their identities are offshoots that grow despite being physically disconnected from their roots. However, the pressure to belong to a particular point of origin and to a nation state leads to feelings of displacement. The triptych of stories about Hema and Kaushik that lives in the last pages of the book explores and exposes these intricacies and complexities. The stories follow the interlinked lives of Hema and Kaushik as well as their families from childhood to adolescence and finally adulthood. Beautifully written, Jhumpa Lahiri explores key issues in relation to one’s identity and belonging in an unaccustomed land. This paper analyzes the ways in which the strangely amalgamated lives of the two protagonists come together as they define, navigate and negotiate their diasporic identities through each other and then through their professions. While the past crushes Kaushik, Hema remains bound by gender expectations and her role as a daughter. In doing so, the two characters are unable to come to terms with their hyphenated identities and ultimately spend their entire lives conflicted between the past, the present and the future, living in exile, searching for a home.

Displacement and Negotiating Identities

As children of immigrants, the second-generation characters in Lahiri's short stories are usually "even more displaced than their parents" because "they share ties to their postcolonial worlds (as a result of their parental upbringing and Bengali 'home' culture), but often are not considered 'postcolonial' subjects ... they are often subjected to a double minority status" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 159). While these individuals with hybrid, hyphenated identities find themselves being marked as "Indian" in the "Western" world, they feel culturally, linguistically, emotionally and geographically out of place in the motherland (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 159). Hema and Kaushik struggle to understand their identities as they fit neither into the world of their parents nor into the world of their immediate residence. For Hema, a third layer of complexity is added because of expectations related to her gender.

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This conflict with positioning oneself in relation to the nation in which one resides and to which one has no immediate ties is portrayed early on in Hema's childhood. In "Once in a Lifetime," Hema begins by recalling her mother putting a turquoise *salwar kameez* on her for a farewell party thrown for Kaushik's parents before they returned to India. As her mother puts the salwar on her, Hema notices that the "inseam of the pajamas was stamped with purple letters within a circle, the seal of the textile company" (Lahiri 2009, 224). Hema, upon noticing the seal remembers, "fretting about this fact ... wanting to wear something else" (224). The salwar kameez with the stamp is representative of the motherland, India, and Hema is confused by this stamp on her clothing. Even as a child, the stamp feels like a foreign presence to her, and she is afraid to wear it until her mother explains to her that "because of the length of the kurta, no one would notice it anyway" (224). This alien stamp on her otherwise new clothing is incommensurable to Hema, similar to the motherland that she had never visited. Yet, it is attached to her, like her motherland, permanently, reminding her of her roots. Even if, to Hema's comfort, it remains hidden to the world by an added layer of clothing, it continues to live within the folds of her trousers.

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Hema's struggle with defining her identity is further explored as she grows up and is forced to wear Kaushik's old clothes. Before returning to India, Kaushik's mother leaves Kaushik's old clothes for Hema as he is only three years older than her. Although Hema tries to avoid wearing his clothes, her mother refuses to replace them. Remembering the resentment that she feels for being forced to wear these clothes, Hema says, "One winter I had to wear your coat, which I hated so much that it caused me to hate you as a result ... I never got used to having to hook the zipper on the right side, to looking so different from the other girls in my class with their puffy pink and purple jacket" (228). As clothing becomes symbolic of one's identity, Hema is being forced by her parents to don a layer of clothing, or identity, that Hema is eager to shed. Kaushik's second-hand coat here represents a communal way of living, an "Indianness" that is uncommon for her American friends. Hema's struggle with the overcoat stems from the pressure to be "loyal to the old world and fluent in the new" (Tayler 2008, para. 8). She realizes, even as a child, that she not only stands out amongst her American culture but is also a misfit amongst other girls in the class by not conforming to the gender expectations of wearing a purple coat. Subsequently, a young Hema is seen to be sandwiched between the expectations and values of two cultures and is unable to fit perfectly into either.

Kaushik too struggles with defining his identity after his return to the United States and the death of his mother. As a university student when he returns home for the first time to visit his father and his new stepmother, Kaushik states, "I was no longer accustomed to Indian food" (Lahiri 2009, 259). Already feeling disconnected from the house where his dead mother has been replaced by another woman, Kaushik is vividly aware of a loss of "home" and an identity. Kaushik also notes, upon meeting his younger stepsisters, that their "accents would soon diminish and then disappear, as would their unstylish sweaters, their silly hairstyles" (263). Kaushik recognizes that similar to himself, his sisters too would drop any traces of their past and ultimately attempt to assimilate into their new surroundings. Nonetheless, interestingly enough, when the adult Kaushik moves to Rome in "Year's End," Hema remarks that "he was dressed like an Italian, wearing jeans and a thin black pullover" (311). Yet, the reality

was that “in Rome, in all of Europe, he was always regarded as an Indian first” (310). Despite dressing up as an Italian on the outside, the world continued to perceive him as a perpetual outsider, an Indian first.

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Unearthing Genealogy

In truth, Hema and Kaushik’s identities are not linked to a nation but are shaped by their own uniqueness. Since they are rhizomes that live despite being broken from their roots, their identities themselves become moveable, thriving with hybridity and distinctiveness. However, as second generation immigrants they are conflicted between two nations because they feel an intense pressure to define themselves in relation to one or the other. As they become unable to find a place for this hybridity both in the ‘East’ and in the ‘West,’ they feel alienated and displaced. For Hema then, Kaushik represents a missing link to her heritage, a source that could potentially draw her back in time and define who she is. Even as the story commences in “Once in a Lifetime,” Lahiri’s writing represents a haunting doubleness about Hema’s identity, as it appears to be inherently linked to Kaushik. Hema, as the narrator, becomes both the “narrated I” and the “narrating I” while Kaushik is the “addressee” and the “narrated you” (Munos 2010, 3). The story begins with Hema stating, “I had seen you before, too many times to count” (Lahiri 2009, 223). Hema’s recollection of Kaushik is marked by fragments of her memory and “by a blurring of boundaries between absence and presence, return and arrival and also between Self and the Other” (Munos 2010, 4). She is also able to recall Kaushik when their mothers meet and bond, as Hema’s mother is pregnant. Interestingly enough, here Hema “gains access to a ‘time of origins’ prior to her own birth, as if the first-person narration exploded its own structural boundaries in terms of focalization and could not expand its scope to times and recollections beyond the narrator’s conscious reach” (7). In remembering Kaushik from the womb, he symbolically represents Hema’s connection to the world, a vessel that connects her to her point of origins. Kaushik, therefore, becomes a “surrogate for what is thought to be missing at the origin,” while “embodying a central void” that represents both “absence and presence” because “it also potentially carries within itself the means of replenishing it” (11). Through Kaushik, Hema

attempts to trace her links and her journey from her roots to her present in order to mitigate the intangible gap that she feels within herself upon being distanced from the motherland.

For Kaushik, his trauma and loss are multilayered. His life shoots off in several directions, as he is born in America then returns to Mumbai only to return to America once more. The stem of his rhizomatic identity, however, is his mother, who nurtures his growth in new environments and remains his link to his roots. Nonetheless, with the death of his mother and the symbolic death of his last links to the motherland, his own emotions, memories and roots are therefore fragmented between these multiple locations. The death of a parental figure fuels the conflict of an individual's already multilayered identity as "it is the death of memory and a disruption of the hyphenated existence when the hyphen itself is disrupted" (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 161). Indeed, Kaushik's original point of trauma exists in his forced migration back to America by his parents. He returns to America with his parents, as his mother is terminally ill and would like to die away from people suffocating her with their sympathies (Lahiri 2009, 250). Kaushik goes on to mention that his mother would have liked to have her ashes dispersed into the Atlantic Ocean rather than in India, and that it made him wish that they were not Hindu (249). The inability to have a grave for his mother, defined by a land or a country, is the reason behind Kaushik's worry. His mother, symbolic of the motherland and his ties to it, can no longer be attached to a location, but instead becomes indefinable, fluid as it flows into the Atlantic Ocean, not belonging to any land. The traumatic loss of his mother and her link to the homeland leads Kaushik to a permanent state of homelessness.

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The Nomad and the Good Daughter

In the end, Kaushik and Hema find their own means of navigating through the complexities of their lives and carving out their own hybrid identities. In this process, while Kaushik turns to photography to preserve the past, Hema becomes a classicist who "resurrect[s]" an old language and texts (Lahiri 2009, 315). Kaushik's love for photography is evident in the first part of the trilogy, where he is often seen with a camera, capturing moments such as the first snowfall at Hema's house (309). Photography

becomes a way for him to not only capture the present but to also “freeze the past” (Bilbro, 387). Lahiri (2009) presents Kaushik as a character who is trapped in the past, swimming in nostalgia and whose trauma lies in his inability to control the death of his mother and his migration to the U.S, then to India and then back to the U.S. His photographs capturing death, accidents and war around the world are representative of his own identity, which is lost in grief. As well, Kaushik’s view of the world through the lens of the camera represents his inability to see the world as it is.² He perceives his surroundings and situations from his own point of view, through his own lens of grief, sadness and mourning. His negative, callous views on life, fuelled by his mother’s death, ultimately leads him to a life of displacement. In “Going Ashore,” Kaushik complains about a speck in his eyes that “continued to accompany him wherever he went, quietly tormenting him” (Lahiri 2009, 308). When he goes to the doctor, he is told that “it was a harmless symptom of getting older” but to Kaushik, “it felt like an invasion of the part of his body, the physical sense that was most precious: something that betrayed him and also refused to abandon him” (308). The speck in Kaushik’s eyes that distorts his vision, that betrayed him but also refuses to leave him is his mother’s death. By dying, she had betrayed him and yet, like the speck, like an invasion of his physical body, the trauma of his mother’s death invades his psyche. The past looms over him and makes it impossible for him to perceive the world and himself clearly.

Kaushik’s inability to come to terms with the death of his mother, which is linked to his disconnection from the motherland, India, leads Kaushik to a nomadic life. As he feels no connection to any land mass or nation state, Kaushik spends a lifetime in exile, never truly belonging. His profession and gender allows him the freedom to travel the world, never residing in any nation but simply moving from one to the next. As Kaushik takes on photography he “drifts across the globe without making meaningful ties” (Lahiri 2009, 306). His only sense of homecoming then comes from his short-lived affair with Hema, as she is the only woman who had known his mother (313). His coming together with Hema is symbolic of his final attempt at finding a home, this time in a person. Yet, Hema is aware that unconsciously, Kaushik’s entrapment in the

past means that he is unable to embrace a future with Hema. While having sex, Hema remarks that “even the fact that Kaushik had to wear a condom ... reminded her, whenever he paused to rip open the little packet that in spite of what they were about to do, they would remain separate” (318). While Hema could have presented Kaushik with the potential for a future, Kaushik only turns to Hema because she reminds him of his past. He asks Hema to follow him to Hong Kong, which led to the breaking of their engagement (321). Recognizing that he would never marry her, which is what she ultimately desires, Hema rejects his offer. Kaushik reacts badly to this and calls her a “coward” (323). In reality, he is distraught, as the final attempt to reconnect and come to terms with his past to start a future with Hema fails and he is once again left to his own devices. He is left with nothing but memories, this time not only of his mother but also of Hema. As he is unable to heal from his position of perpetual mourning of the past and embrace a new future, Kaushik spends a lifetime living in a state of homelessness. In his obsession with the past and his link to the motherland, he is unable to accept his rhizomatic, hyphenated identity. Subsequently, Kaushik dies in the ocean, during a tsunami in Thailand, away from land masses that are infested with social constructions of identity and values. Rather, like his life, he dies in a body of water that does not belong to any nation or individual but flows where it pleases. Interestingly enough, it is by looking at Kaushik’s website, where the photographs are never updated, that Hema realizes that he has died. Lahiri, therefore, brings Kaushik’s life to a full-circle, where his body floats homeless, disconnected from land, and his presence lingers in captured moments of the past.

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Contrary to Kaushik, Hema is unable to wander the world, leave her parents and be sexually independent. Living in the diaspora, Hema becomes the bearer of traditions and culture, with her parents expecting her to uphold their cultural values. Her professional life is not given much credit, but her sexuality is highly controlled. In “Going Ashore,” Hema mentions that “her scholarly life was a mystery to them (her parents), something at once impressive and irrelevant” (Lahiri 2009, 294). While her education is irrelevant, her marriage prospects, sexuality and relationships are of extreme interest, as her ultimate role is that

of a wife and not a scholar. Being a dutiful daughter, Hema upholds her Bengali traditions on the surface by hiding her ten-year torrid affair with a married professor, Julian (298). In the end, she breaks up with Julian because of her “inability to approach middle age without a husband, without children” (298). She realizes that her relationship with Julian would not culminate in marriage, even after ten years. Failing to abide by the expectations to be married and have children that are set aside by her family, Hema agrees to marry Navin, a “non-Bengali” Indian chosen by her parents (297). Navin further reinforces the expectations placed on Hema by virtue of her gender by admitting that even though he has had lovers before, “he was old-fashioned when it came to a future wife” (297). He refuses to be intimate with Hema and is reluctant to move beyond kissing her goodnight until marriage because he expects his wife to maintain her “purity” until the wedding. Even though Hema does not complain when Navin presents her with a giant sarcophagus of a bride and a groom in a glass box, she realizes “there was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter” (297). Thus, before succumbing to these expectations, Hema ventures out once more into the third space of Rome by lying to Navin and her parents (294). She tells them that she would be in Rome for research when in reality she escapes to Rome to find freedom. She explains that it was in this third space that “she was free of both of them (Navin and Julian), free of her past and free of her future in a place where so many different times stood cheek by jowl like guests at a crowded party” (298). It is in this third space that she ultimately reconnects with the past and Kaushik, and finds her agency.

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Rome, therefore, presents a space where Hema and Kaushik’s past, present and future collide. It is neither their “motherland” nor the one where they grow up, and, thus, Hema finds power in the third space by being free from expectations. She is liberated in Rome, where she does not feel “obliged to fit in either the Indian or the American cultures (where they are socially and politically marginalized) but simply maintain their exotic and ‘stranger’ status as a legitimate yet mysterious mode of being” (Dutt-Ballerstadt 2012, 173). She is able to be comfortable with her internal, rhizomatic identity without feeling the pressure to belong to any one part of the tree that houses the rhizome. Furthermore, in

this third space she is able to connect with her past by coming together with Kaushik and reclaiming her sexuality. Kaushik does not “question her further” – neither does he judge or commend her for sleeping with him despite being engaged (Lahiri 2009, 313). When she wakes up the next morning, Hema sees that “the area around her lips, at the sides of her mouth, was covered with small red bumps. And she was pleased by that unbecoming proof, pleased that already he had marked her” (314). She feels pleased because the markers represent her ownership over her own sexuality that is free from the expectations of her parents or fiancé. By “marking her,” Hema feels a link to her past, a sense of stability that she belongs somewhere, with someone.

Indeed, it is through Kaushik that Hema is offered the final opportunity to redefine her identity the way she wants through his asking her to move to Hong Kong with him. However, Hema refuses, realizing that Kaushik would forever be trapped in the past and continue to have a callous attitude about the future. Thus, it would be unlikely for him to want to marry her, and as marriage and motherhood are expected and highly anticipated events in Hema’s life because of her gender, she refuses and returns to India to marry the man that her parents have selected for her. She succumbs to expectations, returns to her roots and foregoes her rhizomatic identity. Yet, as she marries Navin and starts a new life, her heart remains trapped with Kaushik. Upon finding out about his death, her narration sounds weighed down with grief and appears to float from afar. The marriage gives Hema a new life, but it is not one that she is happy in, and this return to her traditions and gender expectations is definitely not one that “revives her.” In fact, as the story concludes, Hema states,

We were married, we were blessed, my hand was placed on top of his, and the ends of our clothing were knotted together. I felt the weight of each ritual, felt the ground once more underfoot ... I returned to my existence, the existence I had chosen instead of you. A small obituary ran in *The New York Times*. By then, I needed no proof of your absence from the world; I felt it as plainly and implacably as the cells that were gathering and shaping themselves in my body. Those cold, dark days I spent in bed, unable to speak, burning

with new life but mourning your death, went unquestioned by Navin, who had already begun to take pride in my condition ... It might have been your child but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you had left nothing behind" (333).

Clearly then, while the third space with Kaushik allowed her to be happy and find a sense of belonging and agency, this space within the arranged marriage condemns her to a lifetime of mourning and regret, just like Kaushik. Kaushik was Hema's last medium through which she both found a lingering presence of her roots and accepted her hyphenated, rhizomatic identity, away from pressures to ascribe to the various roles assigned to her. A return to Navin symbolizes her return to her roots; however, Hema is unable to find happiness as she is not directly connected to these roots. Rather, she is an offshoot of those roots and it is with Kaushik, in a third space where her rhizomatic identity resided. The death of Kaushik represents the demise of Hema's last opportunity to break free from the barriers that restrict her, and to venture into a new space where she could carve out her own identity. Instead, she is once again plagued by a sense of displacement and duality that resides physically with Navin, while at the same time having Kaushik on her mind.

The death of Kaushik represents the demise of Hema's last opportunity to break free from the barriers that restrict her ...

Conclusion

It is obvious that both of the characters spend a lifetime struggling to find their identities. By living in two spaces at once and with the expectation to belong to both, Hema and Kaushik stand with a foot in both places. However, in being viewed as a minority, as different in America with their Bengali customs and traditions, and in feeling like an outsider in terms of linguistic and cultural values in the motherland, Hema and Kaushik search for a home first in each other and then through their professions. Kaushik's struggle is further complicated by his mother's death. Since mothers are usually the bearers of tradition, through her death, Kaushik loses his last connection to his roots as the stem that holds his rhizomatic identity falls apart. Thus begins Kaushik's life as an exile, moving from place to place, capturing moments, residing in the traumas of the past. Hema, on the other hand, is a dutiful daughter who struggles to find a balance between the expectations of her American friends and her Bengali friends.

Added to this is the gendered component that allows Kaushik, as a man, the liberty to distance himself from his father and travel the world, attempting to find a sense of belonging, while Hema is restricted in terms of her sexuality and mobility. She is left with few choices and often sidesteps gender expectations by lying to her parents. Ultimately, Hema and Kaushik remain bound together by their shared past. They are brought together by their parents' friendship, and it is through each other that they attempt to return to the original point of loss to recuperate themselves. However, being two individuals with different expectations and experiences, they depart after their short-lived affair only for Kaushik to die and Hema to marry a man selected by her parents. In a sense, with Kaushik's death, Hema's hybrid identity also dies as the last point of access to her origins is closed. While Hema lets go of the past for a future, Kaushik holds on to his past and blocks out the future. In their inability to find a middle ground between both, like their hyphenated identities, the two characters remain lost throughout the stories. By letting one another go, they are eventually doomed to a lifetime of displacement, as it was in each other that they could find themselves despite being on "unaccustomed earth."

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END NOTES

¹ This is the title of Jhumpa Lahiri's book of short stories.

² Lahiri also uses the symbolism of photography in her book, *Interpreter of Maladies* to portray one's inability to see the world clearly.

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