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TRAUMATIC EFFECTS OF TRANSNATIONAL RELOCATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S UNACCUSTOMED EARTH

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Abstract: *The paper starts from the assumption that contemporary literature of migration presents new patterns of transnational mobility that influence family structures across national borders. While transnationalism is customarily understood as a transcendence of the diasporic condition, the present discussion aims to establish whether these two discourses of dislocation can be considered distinct or overlapping. By analyzing second generation South-Asian American characters engaged in repeated resettlements, the analysis focuses on the reconfiguration of family structures in the context of transnational migration. The characters under scrutiny are Amit and Kaushik, the children of well-off Bengali transmigrants from Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, Unaccustomed Earth. These characters are affected by their parents' decisions to repeatedly change their countries of residence. By examining the childhood and adulthood of Lahiri's parachute kids, the paper signals the fact that intensified relocation does not always generate a beneficial state of fluidity and increased adaptability. Therefore, the evolution of these characters illustrates their peculiar structures of attachment that can be maintained in the context of accelerated family resettlement. By analyzing transnational mobility in recent literature of migration, the present study aims to establish the intersections and discontinuities between the diasporic and transnational discourses.*

Introduction

The paper analyzes the effects of intensified transnational relocations in the case of second generation South-Asian Americans, whose peculiar life trajectories qualify them as parachute kids. This conceptual term has been developed by Asian researchers in their attempt to account for cases of Asian minors who are sent to study in the United States from an early age, without being accompanied by their families (Yuying and Yuli 365). The migration experience of parachute kids seems to be family imposed rather than voluntary and it implies a high degree of isolation, given that the child migrants have to face the challenges of a new culture by themselves. Among the effects of early relocation experienced by parachute kids, researchers mention premature independence, shortened childhood, loneliness, sadness, anger, alienation, and homesickness (Yuying and Yuli 371-2). By examining the evolution of two fictional parachute kids, the present discussion seeks to establish whether the traumatic dimension customarily associated with diasporic experiences is overcome by the freedom to relocate inherent in transnational mobility. While the original meaning of the Greek word 'trauma' refers to a physical injury, the

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medical and psychiatric literature employs the term to designate a mental wound (Caruth 3) or an emotional shock (Misra 107). In Hindi, the concept of trauma has similar connotations and is rendered by a combination of two terms *m – an(a)sik(a)* (mental) and *agh – at(a)* (blow, shock, injury) (Misra 109). The present study starts from the Freudian definition of trauma as a repetitive pattern of suffering that surfaces in the lives of the persons who have experienced certain shocks (Freud 1953-74). Moreover, studies in traumatic stress literature, associate traumatic conditions with the death or loss caused by war, forced relocation, slavery, starvation or genocide (Stamm et al. 92). Seen from this angle, diasporic displacements can be considered traumatic as they involve individuals' separation from their originary homelands (Safran 2003), a tragic sense of displacement (Nasta 132) and feelings of incurable loss (Said 173). The analysis of the second generation South Asian American characters will focus on the traumatic implications of diaspora, establishing whether the emotional wounds of relocated children from transnational families resurface in their adulthood. In order to interpret the adult profiles of the parachute kids, the discussion will also employ Bidisha Banejee's argument regarding the ambivalence of photography and the fragmentation of migrant identities.

A sociological perspective on migration defines transnationalism as a set of practices that enable immigrants to maintain connections between their home and host countries, transgressing the separatist effects of national/physical borders (Basch, Schiller and Blanc 7). From a cultural studies angle, transnationalism entails a particular regime of identity negotiation that involves the individuals' necessity to reconcile a multiplicity of attachments generated by their intensified mobility and concurrent connections to more spaces (Vertovec 5, 6). Emphasizing the migrants' heightened mobility, the transnational paradigm seems to discard the diasporic connotations of exilic loss, foregrounding the emergence of cultural transformations generated by multiple relocations. However, by examining the emotional costs of early relocation, this discussion sets out to reveal the traumatic implications of transnational mobility, foregrounding the intersection between the diasporic and transnational discourses.

The primary corpus of the present analysis is made up of two short stories, ("A Choice of Accommodations" and "Hema and Kaushik") included in Jhumpa Lahiri's collection *Unaccustomed Earth*. "A Choice of Accommodations" presents a former parachute kid (Amit Sarkar) and his wife (Megan) during their visit to the city where Amit attended college (Langford). Here, they take part in the wedding of Amit's former colleague friend, Pam Borden. As an adult, Amit remembers his parents' history of transplantation that started with their departure from Calcutta to Winchester, Massachusetts. In 1984, the parents leave for New Delhi since the father, a highly qualified ophthalmologist, wishes to work in a hospital there, but Amit is left in America to continue his studies. After four years in New Delhi, the Sarkar couple comes back to Houston for the father's professional purposes, and after another five years they move to Lausanne. At the time of the narration, they are reported to live in Saudi Arabia.

The second character is Kaushik Choudhuri, the son of a rich Bengali family who decides to move from Cambridge, Massachusetts back to India (Bombay) in 1974 and then return to the USA in 1981. Hema is the daughter of a Bengali family from Massachusetts, friends with Kaushik's family, whom they shelter for a while after their

return. The present discussion emphasizes the effect of transnational displacement on Kaushik, who is not exactly a parachute kid, given that he is not left alone in America, as it happens to Amit. However, I think this character's experience can be compared to Amit's, given that he is also unsettled by family relocations from an early age. The next section analyzes the impact of early transplantations upon Amit and Kaushik as filtered through their adult perspectives. Then, the argument foregrounds the repetitive pattern of their traumatic relocation that influences their adult capacity for maintaining structures of attachment and mechanisms of detachment.

Child relocation perceived as a trauma

Among Lahiri's first generation of Bengalis, Amit's parents are the most mobile ones. Hence, Amit perceives them as different from the majority of Bengalis in America, given their capacity to transgress national loyalties and adopt translocal identities. Despite the cosmopolitan connotations of their lifestyle, the parents' unhindered mobility has a negative impact upon their teenage son, who feels abandoned in the United States. I consider that Amit illustrates the traumatic condition of a parachute kid, since he equates his parents' departure to New Delhi with a loss of family stability that deprives him of emotional support. As most of Lahiri's first generation Bengali characters, Amit's parents consider that getting an American degree conditions their son's success in the future. Thus, their decision to leave Amit alone in America illustrates that the coherence of the family structure is subordinated to the goal of (social) capital accumulation via Western education. Their movement to India is paralleled by Amit's relocation from his native Massachusetts to Langford, where he is enrolled in a different college. The transition from Winchester to Langford brings forth a series of disturbing challenges for Amit (longing for his parents and experiencing isolation). The shock value of Amit's abandonment at Langford is suggested by his turning gray after this abrupt change:

He'd read it was possible, after a traumatic experience, for a person's hair to turn gray in youth. But there had been no sudden death he could point to, no accident . . . apart from his parents sending him to Langford. (Lahiri 93)

Therefore, the parents' relocation in the name of professional success creates a gap in the family configuration despite the transnational connections they maintain (phone calls, Amit's Christmas trips to Delhi). Amit's refusal to forgive his parents for having parachuted him at Langford suggests his detachment from them that marks a hole in the family fabric:

he was crippled with homesickness, missing his parents to the point where tears often filled his eyes, in those first months, without a warning. He sought traces of his parents' faces and voices among the people who surrounded and cared for him, but there was absolutely nothing, no one, at Langford to remind him of them . . . He learned to live without his mother and father, as everyone else did, shedding his daily dependence on them even though he was still a boy, and even to enjoy it. Still, he refused to forgive them. (Lahiri 97)

The trauma of this particular parachute kid is caused by disrupted family relations that mark a loss of connections between Amit and his parents. Amit's intense longing for his parents suggests that their departure is perceived as a source of emotional distress, as the boy feels deprived of their protective presence. Even as he becomes a father himself, Amit can neither understand nor approve of his parents' choice to leave him behind: "He couldn't imagine sending his daughters to Langford—couldn't imagine letting go of them as his parents had let go of him" (Lahiri 86). In order to retrieve a sense of parental presence and an illusion of family relations, Amit invites Bengali acquaintances of his parents to share the joy of his graduation. Amit's ability to fashion a strategy of parental substitution reveals the emergence of his premature independence that enables him to survive without his parents. However, his capacity to create a surrogate family network does not cancel his feelings of abandonment and loneliness that spring from the loss of stable family relations. While invoking his past, Amit includes himself in the category of the children "who had nowhere to go . . . sons of diplomats and journalists who moved around even more frequently than Amit's parents" (Lahiri 98). Hence, the story line suggests a direct connection between the unsettling experiences of parachute kids and their parents' membership in transnational occupational cultures: bureaucrats, politicians, business people, journalists, diplomats (Hannerz 106). This fact reveals a direct relation between transnational mobility and trauma, as illustrated by the children's difficult coping with parental absence imposed by the latter's intensified mobility. The second character analyzed, Kaushik Choudhuri, has a slightly different profile than Amit. Thus, he is not left alone in the United States and the regime of transnational relocation initiated by his family is taken over by him as an adult. Kaushik is relocated from the USA to India at the age of nine and then back to the USA at the age of sixteen. The element that foregrounds the traumatic dimension of his transnational itineraries is the family's motivation to return to America, namely the mother's terminal stage of cancer. While "A Choice of Accommodations" presents the dissolution of family relations through Amit's alienation from his parents, "Once in a Lifetime" associates transnationalism with the physical disintegration of the family original structure. After his wife dies, Kaushik's father remarries a widow from India (Chitra). Kaushik's relationship with his stepsisters offers a deeper insight into the distress provoked by his relocation to the USA. Although Kaushik cannot easily accept his father's marriage to Chitra, he strives to be empathic to his stepsisters, understanding their shock of transplantation:

I felt separate from them in every way but at the same time could not deny the things that bound us together . . . There was my father, of course, but he seemed to be the least relevant in a way. Like them, I'd made the journey from India to Massachusetts, too old not to experience the shock of it, too young to have a say in the matter. (Lahiri 272, my emphasis)

The fact that Kaushik regards dislocation as a more important commonality than sharing a parent illustrates the emotional impact of child uprooting. His confessions suggest that the factors that have increased the shock value of this experience are the teenage stage and the non-voluntary nature of relocation. Although the transplantation of Chitra's daughters' triggered by their mother's remarriage signals the dissolution of

Kaushik's old family, the same episode enables him to empathize with the girls. As he registers their clumsy attempts to speak correct English, Kaushik remembers his own precarious accent after his return to the USA:

'They spoke to me in English, their accents and their intonation sounding as severe as mine must have sounded to your [Hema's] fully American ear when we arrived as refugee in your family's home. I knew the accents would soon diminish and then disappear, as would their unstylish sweaters, their silly hairstyles'. (Lahiri 263, my emphasis)

The fact that Kaushik compares his family's transit in Hema's home with the condition of refugee resettlement highlights the idea of non-voluntary displacement as a traumatic transition, hinting at the "loss and suffering" inherent in the refugees' uprooting (Morrice 1). His understanding of displacement illustrates how transnational itineraries intersect with the traumatic connotations of diasporic itineraries. Invoking his own reconnection with America, Kaushik remembers the challenges of readjustment. Although the character has overcome the insecurities of resuming life in America, his memories echo a sense of psychological distress associated with the process of child and teenage deracination.

This section has analyzed the traumatic impact of transnational relocation upon the evolution of two characters that share the main coordinates of parachute kids. Both characters experience early displacements as non-voluntary, shocking transitions associated with a loss of family coherence. While Amit is predominantly affected by the absence of his parents and the feelings of abandonment, Kaushik associates his second upheaval with the death of his mother, that signals the dissolution of his family. The present discussion argues that the characters' emotional wounds of childhood have a repetitive nature in the sense that the feeling of loss induced by their early traumas resurfaces in adulthood, influencing their interpersonal ability to become attached to persons and places. The next part of the discussion investigates their adulthood in order to examine the effect of childhood transnational experiences upon their capacity to maintain meaningful ties.

The adult evolution of the former parachute kids

This section interprets Amit's and Kaushik's adult behavior as manifestations of the repetitive pattern of their early traumas of displacement. The discussion argues that both characters experience different degrees of tension between the need for the stability provided by attachments and the impulse to withdraw from meaningful relations as a self-protective mechanism. Amit's childhood experience in relation to his evolution as an adult suggests that his early disconnection from his parents influences his understanding of fatherhood and family relations. His eagerness to start a family springs from his longing to create the context of family attachment that he lacked as a teenager. For example, Amit confesses that he wanted a second child so that his first born would not experience the "lonely existence he remembered" (Lahiri 113). His desire to have children suggests that parenthood offers Amit the opportunity to make up for the emotional losses he has experienced: "It was exotic, the world of parenting, fulfilling him

in a way his job did not” (Lahiri 113). By acting as a responsive father, Amit embodies the model of protective/present parenthood that lacked from his child and teenage evolution. This fact becomes clear as he acknowledges the need for generational continuity between himself and his parents:

His daughters looked nothing like him, nothing like his family, and in spite of the distance Amit felt for his parents, this fact bothered him, that his mother and father had passed down nothing, physically to his children. (Lahiri 94)

The character’s emphasis on continuity through family resemblance underscores his impulse to cancel the history of separation between himself and his parents. Hence, Amit is still haunted by a feeling of lack which is emphasized by his daughters’ non-Indian looks. At the same time, the character’s anxiety prevents him from fully enjoying his family-life, since he seems obsessed by the possibility of losing it. While Megan trusts her daughters’ ability to “survive anything” (Lahiri 90), Amit imagines possibilities of their accidental death: “In each of these scenarios, he saw himself surviving, the girls perishing under his supervision” (91). Amit’s excessive worries about his daughters’ safety unveil his fear of losing his main source of attachment (family) which would reenact his childhood trauma. At the same time, Amit’s insecurities shape his ambivalent outlook on family relations. Thus, his intense loyalty to family is paralleled by his impulse to detach himself from family obligations. It seems that being a husband and a father requires a sense of duty that Amit sometimes perceives as clashing with his needs as an individual. This fact is suggested by his inability to keep his wife company the whole night at Pam’s wedding. Hence, Amit is overwhelmed by the husband–role, feeling relieved when his wife has good time with another guest:

Instead of being jealous Amit felt oddly liberated, relieved of his responsibility to Megan, to show her a good time . . . Now that she’d had a few drinks herself she no longer cared, and Amit realized he was free of his duty to stand by her side. (Lahiri 111, my emphasis)

The character’s relaxation when away from family duties reveals that his dedication to family is paralleled by his inability to fully adhere to family standards. Since the model of family relations Amit experienced as a child and teenager is an unstable structure, he may be afraid of another similar disappointment. My suggestion is that Amit experiences a tension between the need to form family attachments and the urge to be self-sufficient. This conflicting attitude may reveal a self-defensive strategy that makes Amit seek refuge into his own individuality as a remedy against a possible loss of family. This is why he comes to cherish intervals of solitude, although the very purpose of starting a family is to shed isolation:

And wasn’t it terrible that after all the work one put into finding a person to spend one’s life with, after making a family with that person, even in spite of missing that person, as Amit missed Megan night after night, that solitude was what one relished most, the only thing that, even in fleeting, diminished doses, kept one sane? (Lahiri 115)

Amit's association of sanity and solitude reveals his understanding of family relations as factors likely to generate individual distress. More specifically, I interpret his reluctance to achieve family attachment as an effect of his parents' transnationality that deprived him of a life in a stable family structure. Since the character conceives family as a safe heaven, but also as a limitation of individual freedom, one may assume that his ambivalent perception is linked with his childhood abandonment triggered by his parents' translocal lifestyle. Kaushik's adult evolution illustrates a similar tension between the impulse to detach from stable structures (family, places, relationships) and the need to find a source of constancy. However, while Amit struggles with these tensions in the context of a non-itinerant family life, Kaushik chooses a hyper mobile lifestyle, apparently free of attachments and constraints. As an adult, Kaushik reenacts his family's background of resettlement, thus attempting a strategy to avoid pain. The character's impulse to get away suggests that he has come to consider relocation as a customary response to perceived negative circumstances. His itineraries as a photojournalist involve Kaushik's repeated worldwide resettlements which enable him to keep away from the space associated with his mother's death and his father's new life. In order to cope with this irremediable loss, Kaushik needs to disconnect himself from the space that marks his mother's departure into the unknown: "It was there that my mother prepared to depart for another place altogether, one where we would be unable to join her, and from which she would not return" (Lahiri 291). Thus, Kaushik's trips to America are "occasional" (Lahiri 305), job-related occurrences, during which he avoids visiting his father. Their communication goes down to "sporadic e-mails" (Lahiri 306) which suggests the weakening of the father-son bond. Kaushik's choices suggest that he actually avoids the possibility of returning to a home or even creating a home of his own. Hence, his hyper mobility seems to render the very idea of home obsolete, since Kaushik's endless travel rejects the possibility of becoming familiar with the places he visits. B. Banerjee considers that the trope of photography is deeply connected with the topic of immigrant identities. Considering the inherent ambivalence of photography as a signifier of both presence and absence, Banerjee argues that Kaushik employs the practice of taking photos as a (failed) strategy to overcome his estrangement. On the one hand, photography allows Kaushik to counter his unrootedness by providing him a sense of presence. On the other hand, given its connotation of absence, loss and even death, photography reinforces Kaushik's sense of diaspora mourning (Banerjee 443). Banerjee considers that the children of immigrants cannot relate to their parents' initial departure from homeland, as they were not part of this experience. This fact explains why they perceive the loss of homeland as a phantom loss (445). Along similar lines, Munos argues that Kaushik experiences a diasporic trauma typical of the second-generation that is haunted by the "unsymbolisable void marked by the absence of the Motherland" (153). However, I reinterpret these remarks in order to underscore a subtle difference between diasporic and transnational identities. While diasporic affiliations involve a longing for a specific homeland (i.e. India), transnational characters of the second generation do not seem attached to a myth of return. On the contrary, most of them (including Kaushik) do not regard India as their homeland, but as a foreign country. Maybe it is more accurate to say that they have replaced their parents' sense of diasporic loss with an inability to relate to the idea of home at all. While the diasporic trauma involves the idea of rupture from one's native space, the transnational trauma may be formulated as a permanent state of disconnection that does

not grant a feeling of happiness. Therefore, Kaushik's evolution reveals that the second-generation may translate the diasporic longing for a particular home to an abstract longing for settlement that is never achieved. While affording accelerated mobility, this job requires Kaushik's ability to detach himself from the events he captures with the camera. For example, Kaushik's first important photograph renders the image of a male victim during the civil war in El Salvador. Kaushik remembers that the subject of his photo died while he was taking the photograph. Another time, Kaushik passes the scene of a car accident and takes photos without checking if everybody is safe. These situations entail the same paradoxical interplay of involvement and detachment, since taking photographs involves Kaushik's presence in the center of events, but also his ability not to interfere with their significance. At some point, Kaushik admits that he is unsettled by his range of priorities, disapproving his interest in taking a good photo at the expense of what happens beyond the camera. This suggests that Kaushik resents his own tendency to approach life from a distance, rather than emphatically take part in it. At this point, my argument intersects with Banerjee's, since I consider that Kaushik's disappointment expresses his realization that there is something missing from his outlook. In Banerjee's words, the character's sadness reveals his failure to retrieve a sense of presence by photography, but mostly a sense of phantom loss and diasporic mourning (446). However, I delineate my position from that of Banerjee in that Kaushik's loss is not diasporic, but the consequence of his transnational existence that renders him unable to relate to the concept of home. Given the double edge of photography, photojournalism may help Kaushik get a sense of control over his own rootlessness via detachment. At the same time, it also points to his ultimate failure to get a sense of belonging and security, given his inability to forge attachments. The character's central contradiction is illustrated by his unwillingness to settle in a specific location paralleled his enduring loyalty to the memory of his mother. At some point, Kaushik realizes that he has translated his mother's ability to make homes everywhere into a personal distrust of the idea of settlement:

His mother had set up households again and again in her life. It didn't matter where she was in the world, or whether or not she was dying . . . But Kaushik never fully trusted the places he'd lived, never turned to them for refuge. (Lahiri 309)

This passage deconstructs the general association between the first generation immigrants and the sense of diasporic longing, given the mother's ability to construct homes anywhere. In this case, the main difference between the first generation and the second generation is their different approaches to the idea of home. While the first generation can still make sense of such a concept, the second generation seems unable to forge home allegiances at all. Since Kaushik experienced his family's relocations as forced readjustments, he has come to associate the idea of loyalty to places with a potential threat to his sense of security. As Amit, Kaushik perceives the transnational history of his family in direct relation with family dissolution. Unlike Amit, Kaushik does not experience this trauma as abandonment, but as anxiety caused by the irreversible change of the family structure. Given his association of resettlement with death, (i.e. family dissolution) Kaushik operates relocations so as to avoid the possibility of committing oneself to a particular location. Hence, permanent relocation as a

photojournalist has been interpreted as “a form of participation” meant to help Kaushik confront “his isolation and lack of power” (Banerjee 448). While Banerjee is right with respect to this assertion, Kaushik’s disappointment at his own propensity for detachment illustrates a perceived sense of failure to achieve empowerment. Kaushik’s death in the Thailand tsunami marks his ultimate inability to adopt a static existence. His decision to swim in the waters of the Andaman Sea signals a pushing of his own limits, given his fear of water. Before plunging into the sea, Kaushik has a vision of his mother’s vital body swimming which suggests his enduring attachment to her memory. His impulse to jump from the boat is an expression of Kaushik’s longing to feel close to her, since he does it “to show his mother that he was not afraid” (Lahiri 331). This act suggests that despite Kaushik’s lifetime efforts to avoid attachments, his need for bonding is eventually stronger. His death may also be interpreted in relation with the idea of “journey out of life” (Lahiri 315), as the supreme form of displacement that affords the remaking of bonds (between Kaushik and his mother). It also signals the impossibility of creating attachment to persons (Hema) or places (starting a settled life in Hong Kong). As a conclusion, Kaushik’s death by drowning reveals the character’s ability to end the chain of resettlements by means of a last relocation. Hence, his plunge into a borderless world that denies further itineraries parallels the character’s paradox while alive: being imprisoned by his hyper mobility.

Conclusions

The analysis has established that the parachute kids’ transnational trajectories are experienced as traumatic processes that influence their adult evolution. The main effect of their early transplantations is an inability to balance the need for the stability provided by structures of attachment (family, places, relationship) with the impulse to preserve a sense of detachment meant to avoid the trauma of another loss. Amit’s childhood distress is represented by his feelings of abandonment that translate as an adult need for the security provided by a family structure. At the same time, the character’s suspicion towards the very possibility of durable patterns triggers his impulse to maintain a sense of detachment from family relations. In his case, one may consider that the parents’ transnational resettlements do transfer a sense of longing upon their son. At this point, the transnational and diasporic axes of identification seem to overlap, given that Amit’s wistfulness for his parents may be equated with a yearning for lost origins. Along similar lines, “Hema and Kaushik” presents transnationalism in relation with a traumatic dissolution of family structure that renders the main character unable to form other attachments, except for his devotion to his dead mother. Attempting to heal his loss by means of a nomadic identity, Kaushik struggles between the impulse to detach himself from life’s events and the need to relate to someone who shares elements of his past. However, once he has taken over the strategy of permanent displacement as a form of self-preservation, the character is eventually unable to exit the circle of relocations, other way than through death. By outlining the relation between trauma and transnational relocation, the present argument suggests that transnational itineraries are better understood if considered continuations, rather than interruptions of diasporic configurations.

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