The European Proceedings of
Social & Behavioural Sciences
EpSBS

ISSN: 2357-1330

https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2019.09.66

INCoH 2017
The Second International Conference on Humanities

MIGRANT WOMAN AND THE PARADOXICAL GAZE IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*

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Abstract

The contemporaneous feminist argument that there is "a gaze" at work within patriarchal culture, and within the existing hierarchies of power, is important in the context of the portrayal of women by diasporic writers. The female gaze and the immigrant woman's in-/visibility is often complicated by phallocentric cultural imperatives and social standards. This essay examines the act of "looking" in terms of its paradoxical nature in Indian diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008). The collection is comprised of eight short stories that depict female gaze as a practically threatening, castrating and immobilizing phenomenon. This paper seeks to delineate how the patriarchal world of Lahiri's fiction paves the way for the systematic oppression of the immigrant women by controlling ways of looking and spectacle and by de-privileging the female subject of the right to look. Throughout the stories, the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of female gaze is undermined, and eventually turned into a mere parody of the male one; and hence the phallocentric conviction that woman must not look.

Keywords: Unaccustomed Earth, hell-heaven, voyeurism, Panopticon, female gaze.

https://doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2019.09.66
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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference
eISSN: 2357-1330

1. Introduction

The contemporaneous feminist argument that there is "a gaze" at work within patriarchal culture and the existing hierarchies of gender is important in the context of the portrayal of women by diasporic writers (Manlove, 2007). The female gaze and the migrant woman's visibility or invisibility are often complicated by phallocentric cultural imperatives and social standards inasmuch as the patriarchal imagery negatively presents a stereotypical portrait of the woman as merely a passive object of display, without ever returning the gaze (Asl, 2015; Mulvey, 1975). This study focuses on the ways the South Asian American writer Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008)—hereafter referred to as *UE*—explores the complex interplay between the looking subject and the displayed object with respect to the paradoxical nature of the act of "looking"..

2. Problem Statement

Despite the overwhelming public and critical recognition Lahiri's *UE* has amassed since its appearance in 2008, an attention to the state of visibility as a hierarchical force in the formation of the diasporic subjectivity, or an analysis of the relationship between observation and display, or seeing and being seen between the male and female characters has notably been absent in all those considerations. A large group of reviewers hailed the work as a sympathetic and compassionate contribution to exploration of a range of nomadic experiences of the immigrant wives/mothers/daughters (Brady, 2008; Connelly, 2008; Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2012; Fertile, 2008; Ogle, 2009). Others foregrounded the collection's unconventional portrayals of gender relations, and applauded Lahiri for the emasculated depictions of Asian men (Dhingra, 2012; Kasun, 2009; Tripathy, 2014). Apart from such rhapsodic commentaries, some of the criticism has offered less-feminist readings of the collection. Critics such as Asl (2018), Asl and Abdullah (2017), Asl, Hull and Abdullah (2016), Asl, Abdullah and Yaapar (2016, 2018) and Cussen (2012) are critical of Lahiri's depictions of migrant women inasmuch as they argue for her anti-feminist tendencies due to her privileging of masculinity over femininity. These critics have been leery that Lahiri's fictional emphasis on emasculated men aims at appeasing white audiences, and thus it fails to explore Bengali women's cross-cultural experiences through feminist perspectives (Akhter, 2014, p. 98). Against the widespread inclination on the part of scholars to applaud Lahiri as a feminist, the present study argues that the female gaze in Lahiri's fiction is depicted as a practically threatening, castrating and immobilizing phenomenon; hence the need for a thorough exploration of the interaction between the voyeur and the exhibitionist, and the relationship between the privileged looking subject and the de-privileged object of the look.

3. Research Questions

To study the relation between the gaze and subjugation and for examining the main hypothesis of the present study outlined hereafter, we will focus on two of the stories that directly engage with gender identity and dynamics of the gaze. It is assumed in this essay that the gaze, as Western culture has formulated and perpetuated it, is "the privilege of a male subject, a means of relegating women (or 'Woman') to the status of object (of representation, discourse, desire, etc.)" and that the woman's gaze is

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depicted as "provoking, withering, [and] annihilating" (Newman, 1990, p. 1031). In the light of the above assumption, we seek to address the questions of, who sees in Lahiri's stories, and what happens when a woman holds a look? And, what are the complexities of the interplay between the spectator and the spectacle as formulated in the stories?

4. Purpose of the Study

Drawing upon the psychoanalytic and socio-historical theories of the gaze, this article aims at examining acts of looking in Lahiri's diasporic narratives. Lahiri's collection is comprised of eight short stories, but the primary corpus of the reading is made up of the titular story "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven". We seek to map out the way the portrayed patriarchal world in Lahiri's fiction paves the way for systematic oppression of the immigrant women by controlling acts of looking and spectacle and by de-privileging the female subject of the right to look.

5. Research Methods

The theoretical justification for this reading is derived from the idea that practices and discourses that are yoked to sexism and racisms "cannot be conceived of separately but must be thought of as interdependent" (Finzsch, 2008, p. 2). Thus, the two seemingly divergent fields of the gaze, the psychoanalytic mode of sexist practice and the historicist form of societal power, form the theoretical approach of the present study. Both fields have centred on objectification of women within hetero-centric societies. This close connection between women and the gaze in Western culture was highlighted in John Berger's path breaking book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) which aimed at examining relations between sexes. In Western culture, as he asserts, "[m]en look at women (Berger, 2008). Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relations of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male and the surveyed female" (p. 42). In doing so, the woman is turned into "an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight" (p. 42). Within this hierarchical visual discourse, the woman is forever relegated to the status of an object, and is never allowed a subject position. From a traditional psychoanalytic perspective, not least Freudian and Lacanian tradition, this is a naturally and perfectly justifiable phenomenon, because women, as exhibitionist subjects, desire and thus enjoy being looked at and displayed: "I know that I am (loved) by the way I see myself being looked at by the other" (Newman, 2004, p. 2). Mulvey (1975) describes this phenomenon as the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of the woman. Whereas the woman's role is to be a passive exhibitionist, the male role is to actively appropriate the female body into a pleasurable object by projecting his "fantastic gaze" on her and turning her into an object of his voyeurism. As she explicates,

> [i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (p. 11)

In the arena of Western cinema, she maintains, the combination of phallocentric society and voyeuristic practices conceive of a visual narrative an outlet for female objectification and sexual exploitation.

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Such an objectification of the female image, nonetheless, at the same time that is pleasurable, paradoxically bears in itself a threat to male spectators—a problem that Mulvey yokes to castration anxiety. The female figure, according to her, "connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure" (p. 13). It is at this crucial moment that the theory of the gaze raises the question that "what is at stake for women in this process of being looked at? Can a woman be the bearer of the gaze, instead of or in addition to its object?" (Warhol & Herndl, 1997, p. 427).

In a reading of Lacan's seminars on the gaze, Heath (1978) employs Freud's reading of Medusa, a monstrous figure whose staring eyes provoke terror and turn the observer to stone, to draw attention to the phallocentric reply given by psychoanalysis that, "[i]f the woman looks, the spectacle provokes, castration is in the air, the Medusa's head is not far off; thus, she must not look, is absorbed herself on the side of the seen" (p. 92). Medusa's defiance of the constructed male gaze—a means of his sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic overvaluation—is dramatically unsettling as it unavoidably disturbs "the pleasure the male subject takes in gazing and the hierarchical relations by which he asserts his dominance" (Newman, 1990, p. 1031). Thus the affinity between female look and the monster's provoking, annihilating eyes is established within the patriarchal structures of the gaze. A woman who assumes the desiring look of the male-voyeur-subject "threatens to immobilize him, to deprive him of his self-command, to render him stock-still—practically to paralyze him" (Newman, 1990, p. 1030). This potentially subversive female gaze becomes so threatening to male power that, according to Williams (1984) "it is violently punished," and is grotesquely parodied insofar as her "exercise of an active investigating gaze can only be simultaneous with her own victimization" (p. 563-70).

Given this paradoxical paradigm, in what follows, we will examine the complex dynamics of the male and female gaze, and will investigate the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of female observers. This entails an investigation into the various ways the female gaze is undermined for taking the role of spectator. We hope to explore not only the visual metaphors but a process of grotesque parody in which the female gaze is shown to share close affinity with the eruption of her repressed animal sexuality that poses yet another threat to the heteronormative order of the society.

6. Findings

The subject matter of both "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven" concentrates mainly on gender relations. The former narrates the story of second generation immigrant Ruma and her complex relationship as daughter/wife/mother with her first generation immigrant father, her American husband and her third generation Americanized son Akash. Since Ruma's mother died before the story begins, Ruma is now obligated to care for her father, too, and act the triple role of daughter/wife/mother. Thus the narrative explores the dynamic roles and complex gender hierarchies existing within a diasporic Bengali family in America. "Hell-Heaven" delves deeper into the heart of the matter and focuses the emotional alienation of a displaced Bengali woman called Aparna or Boudi, who is the mother of the second-generation diasporic narrator Usha. Based on what Usha reminisces, the story reflects on the unrequited passion of this traditional Bengali mother for a newly-arrived graduate student at MIT named Pranab Chakraborty, who eventually leaves her to marry an American girl. Apart from details of Boudi's

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emotional alienations, the story indulges itself into stereotypical details of cultural clashes, in particular that of boy-girl relations.

6.1. Invisibility of the Uncompromising Woman in "Unaccustomed Earth"

The domestic space Lahiri limns in "Unaccustomed Earth" is gender-inflicted because in designating particular social acts as feminine, she denominates the others as masculine. This is most explicitly exposed in the beginning lines of the story that perfectly stand as the paradigmatic of how the polarity of masculine/feminine functions throughout the narrative. As we are told,

> [a]fter her mother's death, Ruma's father … began traveling in Europe, a continent he'd never seen. In the past years he had visited France, Holland, and ... Italy …. When he was away Ruma did not hear from him …. Occasionally a postcard would arrive in Seattle, where Ruma and Adam and their son lived. The postcard showed the facades of churches, stone fountains crowded piazzas, terra-cotta rooftops mellowed by late afternoon sun. (*UE*, p. 3)

The excerpt is a good example that is evidence to the central argument of the present research: that in Lahiri's fiction looking is constructed as the privilege of a male subject; that the patriarchal society structures and controls ways of looking and spectacle; that the woman stands as signifier for the male other; and that the immigrant women's "otherness" paves the way for their systematic oppression.

The father's corporeal over-living of the mother and his metaphoric seeing for his daughter, intimated in sending postcards to her, underline his credibility and perspective in acting as female surrogate—by allowing Ruma to assume a perspective on the continental experiences—and buttress a fundamentally ideological belief in the privileged position of the patriarch in the dyad of the seeing/being seen. The father sees without being seen because in nearly all the photos, as the narrator tells us, "there was never a sense of her father's presence in those places" (*UE*, p. 4). More significantly, in informing Ruma of his traveling experiences and seeing the world, he "wrote succinct, impersonal accounts of the things he had seen and done" (p. 4). This turned the transference of knowledge into "a one-sided correspondence" (p. 4). Such a framed allocation of the accounts to Ruma in father's postcards and the implied articulation of the possibility of accession to knowledge through seeing, unveils the manner looking operates as both a source of knowledge and a mode of appropriation. The next few paragraphs of the story further and rather parodically, elaborate this stablished visible/invisible dyad and underscore its significance.

The oppositional duality that is formed in the beginning line of the narrative (father/mother, presence/absence, being/nothingness, seeing/spectacle) conceives a subtle hierarchical relation that establishes the privileged position of the patriarch and, in effect, the repressive subordination of femininity. The narrative and perspectival loss of the mother has happened as a solution to the problem of excessive female desire in the process of assuring social order. The mother is situated in a double bind in which her desire to retain her original identity and her integrating into the mainstream are considered to be incompatible insofar as she ultimately has to opt for the latter to avoid possible social punishment. The mother's "difference" is so conspicuous that she "would have stuck out in this wet Northern landscape, in her brightly colored saris, her dime-sized maroon bindi, her jewels" (*UE*, p. 11). The apparent problem of the mother's adamant refusal to assimilate is further exacerbated by her "lamenting the fact that her

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daughter preferred pants and skirts to the clothing she wore" (p. 17). In consequence, and unsurprisingly, the uncompromising mother, as the (monstrous) other, is excluded from the domain of visibility and from the existence within the narrative as a punishment for her failure to accept the socially desirable norms. She is thus described in the very beginning line of the story as dead and absent and is not only consigned to oblivion but replaced with a fully assimilated Mrs. Meenakshi Bagchi, a younger Americanized Indian woman who wears "Western clothing, cardigans and black pull-on slacks" and who has more commonalities with the father (p. 9). Ruma's mother is indeed portrayed as the "opposite of Mrs. Bagchi" who, in contrast to the former's constant complaining about "the isolation of living" in America (p. 29), did enjoy living in the new world. For that reason, while Mrs. Bagchi is embraced as a more desirable woman, the mother is remembered for the degenerative disease that she was severely afflicted with.

Both Mrs. Baghchi and the mother thus serve as a model for Ruma to follow. On the one hand, the former as a homogenized woman appears not only as liberal, but also as the liberating one—of Ruma's father from the fetters of a conventional companionship. This appears to be an inherent feature of Mrs. Bagchi whose first name, Meenakshi, etymologically refers to a Hindu goddess that looks after her devotees and by whose sight all miseries disappear. In complete contrast to Mrs. Bagchi, Ruma's unassimilated mother disappears due to the intrinsic nature of her affliction. The significance of the mother's death is twofold: On the one hand, it indicates the nihilation of physical body of the female subject and, on the other, signifies the triumph of the point of view of the father over the perspective of the mother. The body of the ungovernable immigrant woman viz., Ruma's mother is thus represented as mortal flesh that annihilates itself from within, as if death is inherent in her feminine nature, and becomes invisible. This is most strikingly illustrated in the incurable "gallstone" disease that makes her undergo "routine" operations and ultimately die of a heart failure on the operating table.

Ruma's mother is thus a stereotypical figure whose deficiency and horrible death haunts Ruma persistently. As we are told, she knows this now that "death, too, had the power to awe … that a human being could be alive for years and years, thinking and breathing and eating, ... taking up space in the world, and then, in an instant, become absent, invisible" [italics our emphasis] (*UE,* p. 46). It is this sudden frightful realization that sets her mother's example "as a warning, a path to avoid" (p. 11); ergo, unlike her mother, who insisted upon "strict" discipline throughout child rearing regarding the acquisition of Bengali language, Ruma "lacked the discipline to stick to Bengali" when it came to raising her own son, Akash (p. 12), not to mention that she is not even able to "decipher" Bengali alphabet (p. 50). Moreover, in her adult life, not only Ruma sheds in "many [Bengali] habits of her upbringing" that her "authoritative" mother inculcated in her, she becomes accomplice in wiping out "memory of her mother" by keeping only three "of the two hundred and eighteen saris, … telling her mother's friends to divide up the rest" (pp. 14-7). Compared to her unassimilated mother, Ruma speaks differently, dresses differently and seems "foreign in every way, from the texture of [her] hair to the shapes of [her] feet and hands" (p. 54). Accordingly, the social role assigned to Ruma eventually and figuratively incarcerates her within the domestic sphere of the home to serve as an image of man within the traditional notions of femininity—as a daughter/a wife/a mother—any deviation from which would be equal to death and invisibility

Finally, it is thus striking that the dichotomies assimilated/unassimilated and familiar/different exactly coincide in this story with the dichotomies present/absent, appealing/ailing and living/dead in which the first part is privileged with the right to look. The identification of masculinity and assimilation

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with life and motion and femininity and difference with death and stagnation forms the basis of the ontologico-carnal hierarchy that "Unaccustomed Earth" attempts to institute. It is through death that the point of view of the mother is defeated by the annihilating look of the father. She neither sees nor returns a look, nor even exists; her existence rests on those who survive her, i.e., her husband and Ruma. The former substitutes her with a more appealing and Westernized Mrs. Bagchi and as Ruma admits, "if anything, he seemed happier now; her mother's death had lightened him" (*UE*, p. 33). And the latter facilitates the process of pure annihilation by expediting the "wiping out of her mother's presence" (p. 6). In this manner, it is also the triumph of father's point of view over Ruma's perspective which is finally extended to Mrs. Bagchi. This is doubtless what Ruma's father's plantation in their garden symbolically represents, that the masculine power to act upon others in the name of assistance. Eventually, it is the planted "hydrangea" that impels Ruma to mail Mrs. Bagchi the postcard that "her father had chosen" (p. 59).

The world of "Unaccustomed Earth," the seemingly apolitical personal sphere of the diasporic household, thus operates as the archetypal example of contemporary disciplinary institutions. The enclosed private domain renders the hegemonic state with an opportunity to produce a "magical space" for the female protagonist Ruma to realize practices of self-regulation, to re-form herself and to reborn according to the prescribed homogenizing social norms. The enclosure of the Indian home thus renders Ruma with a certain space unaffected by any unchecked connection with the outside world. In this manner, Lahiri conceives a civil society regulated from the inside out by the construction of governable normal domestic spheres within "the body politic." The effort, however, continues to normalize and underwrite "the sexual division of labor" that forms the basis of Western logic.

6.2. Dyad of Spectator/Spectacle in "Hell-Heaven"

The title itself indicates that this story revolves around predictable binaries of infernal damnation and utopian delight by pitching progressive Americanized Indian man Pranab Chakraborty and the assimilated daughter Usha against her sari-clad, orthodox and old-fashioned mother Boudi, who atrociously contemplates suicide by attempting to set herself on fire at the end of the story. The narrative is woven around what Usha remembers or fails to recall; and the reader follows the growth of the unassimilated mother's obsession and progressive despair from the Americanized Usha's perspective. Much like Lahiri's previous stories, "Hell-Heaven" reinforces the prevailing unequal power relations of male dominance wherein looking functions to regulate sexual relations of its members.

Pranab's voyeurism throughout the story is flagrant. This is most vividly epitomized in his genuine interest in photography with a particular kind of camera "that required thought before you pressed the shutter" (*UE,* p. 64). The sadistic nature of his voyeurism is equally flagrant; he "tail[s] behind" Boudi and Usha, wanders with them and watches them "look at discounted housewares" and "the stream of students and professors filing busily along the paths" (p. 60). Finally, the voyeur Pranab confronts Boudi, and tapping on her shoulder, subjects her to an structural inquiry that "if she might be a Bengali" (p. 61). Boudi's response to this question, as Usha tells us, was clear given that her "mother was wearing the red and white bangles unique to Bengali married women, and a common Tangail sari, and had a thick stem of vermilion powder in the center parting of her hair, and the full round face and large dark eyes that are so

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typical of Bengali women" (p. 61). Later, his sadistic attitude is fully exposed in his obsessive liaison to "a married Bengali woman" that destroyed "two families in the process" (p. 81).

Furthermore, Pranab's active voyeurism is metaphorically reinforced in his avidly listening to Boudi's stories. Having spied on her only to realize that she was married, he now desires to look again, through Boudi's own eyes—i.e., by paying heed to tales of her own life. As Usha tells us, he "listened to these stories with interest, absorbing the vanishing details of her past. He did not turn a deaf ear to her nostalgia, like my father, or listen uncomprehending, like me" (*UE*, p. 66). Rather, he is keen to have knowledge of her history and thereby obtain mastery over her. Hearing about Boudi's past thus becomes a metaphor for Pranab's scopophilic propensities to gain both pleasure and knowledge. The inclination is made explicit in the narrative when Usha reveals that Pranab "wooed her [mother] as no other man did" (p. 67), and even more explicit, in how Usha and her mother became a "favorite subject" of his photography. In one particular photograph, Pranab's symbolic appropriation of and triumph over Boudi is precisely expressed in his obtrusive presence:

> There is only one photograph in which my mother … is holding me as I sit straddling her lap, her head tilted toward me, her hands pressed to my ears ... In that picture, Pranab Kaku's shadow, his two arms raised at angles to hold the camera to his face, hovers in the corner of the frame, his darkened, featureless shape superimposed on one side of my mother's body (p. 64).

Looking at Boudi through the camera, Pranab has provided for himself a privileged stance, a right to look, a purely fictitious world to appropriate Boudi as the object of his desire and, last but not least, a shelter from the other's gaze. The shadow, nonetheless, is not an obvious symbol, but it does suggest that Pranab positions himself on Boudi's body by laying his shadow on her. To do this, he systematically encloses Boudi in a frame, forcing his shadow to superimpose on the actual physical appearance of his fetish. In doing so, Pranab also situates his subjects of photography in a panoptic structure in which himself as the observer is much freer than the objects of his gaze; in other words, he reconstructs the situation of secret observer as one of harmless and pure activity. The complexities of focusing—one that requires "thought"—suggest that just as hearkening to Boudi's nostalgia serves for Pranab as a metaphor for watching, so does his own favorite hobby.

Boudi's stationary passivity reinforces her feminine position with respect to Pranab's active voyeurism, but it also foregrounds another difference in the nature of their seeing. Whereas Pranab's observation is essentially a sadistic experience, it is Boudi's masochistic exhibitionism that make her a seemingly perfect counterpart to him. As Usha reminisces, Boudi "knew that she could never have Pranab Kaku for herself, and I suppose it was her attempt to keep him in the family" (*UE*, p. 67). Apparently, Boudi knows her role is to submit to the needs of the masculine so that she can "keep him in the family" (p. 67). Hence, Pranab's visits, according to Usha, were what her mother eagerly anticipated every day: That she donned "a new sari and combed her hair" in preparation for his incoming; that she planned beforehand what to cook for him; and that "she lived for the moment she heard him call out 'Boudi!' from the porch and that she was in a foul humor on the days he didn't materialize" (p. 63). Pranab's sadism, nonetheless, wins through and the courtship of Boudi and Pranab at the end, read with respect to Lahiri's earlier stories, relates the utopian story of the contemporary Domestic Ideology which underpins the domestication (and submissiveness) of the woman. Boudi's capitulation to the ideology of patriarchal

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family eventually brings a "warmth" between her husband and herself "that had not been there before, a quiet teasing, a solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill" (p. 81).

But Boudi poses a deeper problem. Her voyeurism is flagrant, too, as she becomes infatuated with a man who is the most "unanticipated pleasure in her life" (*UE*, p. 67). As a result, even though her exhibitionism has already been verified by her changing into new clothes and new hairstyles, Boudi does not merely appear as an absolutely passive spectacle and object of desire. The dyad of seeing/being seen is once reversed and Boudi is put in the situation of a spectator. She sits and watches Praanab Kaku swim in the lake, his chest "matted with thick dark hair" (p. 67). Upon appropriating Pranab as the object of her visual pleasure, not only Boudi releases herself from the fetters of objectivity and thereby asserts her existence as a subject, but she also takes the role of a masculine spectator and in so doing emasculates Pranab as the object of her gaze. Pranab thus becomes "an odd sight, with his pole-thin legs and a small, flaccid belly, like an otherwise svelte woman who has had a baby and not bothered to tone her abdomen" [italics our emphasis] (p. 66).

"Hell-Heaven" thus depicts female gaze as a practically threatening, castrating and immobilizing phenomenon. Yet the narrative defends the masculinity of Pranab against the threat of Boudi's gaze by parodying the latter's assertive existence and by transforming her into a monstrous figure, which is most explicitly illustrated in: First, Pranab's courtship with the American girl Deborah that incites Boudi to bitterly resent Deborah's influence over her secret beau and deny the obvious fact that she was "utterly beautiful" (*UE*, p. 68); then, Boudi's secondary infertility that prevents her from carrying a child to live birth insofar as "for the fifth time" since Usha's birth, she becomes "so sick and exhausted" that "after ten weeks, she miscarried once again and was advised by her doctor to stop trying" (p. 70). Boudi's body and its corporeality is thus represented as mortal flesh that annihilates itself from within; and finally, through Usha, the story parodically relates Boudi's pathological attempt to commit suicide, nihilate her own body and, in so doing, ironically, yield to the triumph of the point of view of the other. Indeed, Boudi's suicidal act reiterates the central thesis of Lahiri's fiction that the woman is an object before she is a subject, that it is very possible that the dyad of spectator/spectacle be reversed, but the woman's assuming the role of observer necessarily involves a redefinition of her as monstrous in that her masculine position necessarily emasculates the male counterpart..

7. Conclusion

Lahiri's diasporic narratives are replete with subaltern heroines who are cast aside from the visible domain even within the confined domestic sphere of the family, or whose desire to subvert the status quo—to transform passive spectacle into active-voyeur-subject in the social sphere of the new land—causes domestic and social trouble, deviates from established moral and cultural norms, requires effective discipline and appropriate punishment, or gets them excluded from the narrative structure. The neoliberal context of America, as portrayed in Lahiri's fiction, may accordingly render a rare example of a new world that allows the expression of female autonomy and sexual desire, and which aligns it with the actively assuming of the role of spectator, but it does so in the cases of Ruma's mother of "Unaccustomed Earth" and Usha's mother of "Hell-Heaven" only to repudiate them for this very act, only to show how grotesque woman's desire can be. In this manner, the legitimacy and authentic subjectivity of female gaze

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in Lahiri's stories is undermined, and eventually turned into a mere parody of the male one; and hence the phallocentric conviction that woman must not look.

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