

Conditional Kin: Derridean Hospitality and the Threshold of Belonging in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction

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Abstract

This article draws on Jacques Derrida's notion of hospitality in order to rethink the family home as a site where hospitality is never innocent, complete, or secure. Home is looked at as a threshold governed by an unstable relation between welcome and refusal, and Derrida, in his work *Of Hospitality* (2000), categorises hospitality based on two laws: the “unconditional Law of hospitality” and the “conditional laws of hospitality”. The two separate forms of hospitality, together with his account of ‘hostis’, a term that shares its root with both ‘host’ and ‘hostile’, Derrida gives an account of how hospitality is put into practice. The domestic household in this regard becomes a space where affection is often inseparable from judgement; at the same time, intimacy is always tainted with the power to exclude. This enables a diverse reading of the family home as a structure that is always shadowed by its possible revocation at any time. By examining the two short stories, “Unaccustomed Earth” and “Hell-Heaven”, from Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), this article portrays the family home as a site where hospitality is never innocent, never complete, and never secure. When read together, the two select short stories not only talk about estrangement or return but also stage hospitality as an aporia, a domestic promise whose possibility depends on the very limits that undo it, and in doing so, the article shifts the idea of homecoming away from recovery and loss towards sovereignty, legibility, and the fragile ethics of welcome.

Keywords: Family Home, Conditional Hospitality, Unconditional Hospitality, Hostis, Domestic Threshold, Sovereignty

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality is regarded as one of the oldest, most fragile ethical gestures, and is defined as “a contemporaneous human exchange, which is voluntarily entered into, and designed to enhance the mutual well-being of the parties concerned through the provision of accommodation, and/or food, and/or drink” (Brotherton, 1999, as cited in Lashley & Morrison, 2000, p. 142). A French philosopher of the twentieth century, Jacques Derrida, in his work *Of Hospitality* (2000), distinguishes between two forms of hospitality: “Law of hospitality” and “laws of hospitality”. The first form is an ethical ideal, and the second, the plural form, is often a regulated social practice. The “Law of hospitality” is an unconditional openness to the other; here the guest is welcomed even without a name, identity, or purpose of arrival. However, the “laws of hospitality” are often lived and administered. Here every welcome is governed by limits, permits, and conditions (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000/1997, pp. 25–27).

The point to be taken into consideration is the fact that the Law of hospitality cannot fully take its shape without undoing the sovereignty on which a household or a nation depends. Thus, for Derrida, the unconditional hospitality associated with this form of hospitality is not a practical failure, but it is structurally impossible. The host remains the master of the threshold in order to host at all, yet mastery itself makes an unconditional welcome impossible (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000/1997, pp. 55–57). The ultimate solution to this and that which is often seen in practice is not a fallen version of true hospitality but hospitality rendered under specific conditions. As Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000/1997) state,

No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice, a certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality. (p. 55)

Another recent reading of Derrida by Lóránt Kicsák (2022) emphasises the same tension, where the unconditional is understood as a horizon that places pressure on the legal and the political forms rather than an easily realizable norm (pp. 14, 16).

Derrida’s etymological insistence on the term “hostis” further sharpens this logic. “Host” and “hostile” share the same root as hostis; this in turn indicates that hospitality is never free of power. The one who welcomes also controls access, a control which can turn quickly into suspicion or exclusion (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000/1997, pp. 81–83). So, it is evident to note that hostility is not the opposite of hospitality but one of its latent possibilities. A related hospitality study by Lashley et al. (2015) suggests the potentiality of the host-guest relations to be historically connected with reciprocity, surveillance, and even the ability to manage strangers rather than simple benevolence. He notes, “In most pre-industrial societies the reception and kindly treatment of strangers was highly valued, though... the motives were not always solely altruistic. Receiving strangers into the household helped to monitor the behaviour of outsiders” (p. 4). Derrida radicalises this further by making the interplay between welcome and threat internal to the very notion of hospitality itself.

A technical concept developed by Derrida that requires a mention at this point is the “arrivant”, an unknown newcomer who arrives without being stabilised by identity or by relation. The arrivant matters because this figure’s unconditional hospitality will have to be received precisely, such as the other, before classification or interrogation (Derrida & Dufourmantelle, 2000/1997, pp. 103–106). The problem can be further clarified by the distinction between invitation and visitation as put forth by Derrida himself: an invited guest is expected to enter on the terms and conditions presented before them by the host, whereas a

visitor tests those terms by arriving without any prior authorisation. However, this model cannot be applied to family returns, as family members are not absolute strangers, yet they may still need to re-earn the place they left behind, further revealing the conditional status of the domestic belonging. This article, therefore, employs four analytical moves: the interrogation moment, the condition attached to welcome, the sovereignty tell, and the rhetoric or practice gap for the close reading of the select texts of Lahiri, whose stories stage belonging as something repeatedly voiced as unconditional while also operating on practice through restriction, withdrawal, and revocation.

A writer of migration, family, and transnational belonging, Jhumpa Lahiri (b. 1967) is a prominent voice in contemporary Indian American literature. Her novels include *The Namesake* (2003) and *The Lowland* (2013), and her short fictions include *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) and *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), among others. Across her works, the household is rarely a settled refuge; it is a place where memory, obligation, and even emotional distance are repeatedly challenged and negotiated. Out of all her works, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) dealt with the strangeness involved in settling on unfamiliar ground, making the text especially apt for this study involving acceptance and hospitality.

The title of the text, *Unaccustomed Earth*, in itself is suggestive of the uncharted territories that one has to traverse in a lifetime, which in turn frames the notion of belonging as unstable, let alone assured. The entire collection carries short stories dealing with arrivals, returns, and incorporations into family homes. This makes the threshold a central narrative site rather than some background detail. This article locates two short stories from the collection, and taken together, they represent a distinct guest position: a parent seeking re-entry and a non-blood outsider accepted and later expelled. The article especially uses this comparative design in order to discern that Lahiri's interest is not exclusive to one family relation or one emotional crisis. It is evident to note that hospitality and its limits are structurally etched into the domestic world of Lahiri, and her stories make the family threshold visible as a site where belonging must be negotiated, tested, and sometimes withdrawn. All the existing criticisms have read Lahiri as orbiting through diaspora, nostalgia, identity, and immigrant subjectivity, and a look at the hospitality-theoretic account of family threshold and conditional welcome remains underdeveloped in her scholarship.

The titular short story, "Unaccustomed Earth", in the collection revolves around the life of a young Bengali American woman named Ruma living in Seattle with her husband Adam and son Akash. Following the sudden death of her mother, Ruma's father comes to live with them for a week while Adam is away for a business trip. The story portrays Ruma's mind battling the notion of whether her filial duty requires her to invite her father to stay with her family permanently or not. Unbeknownst to her, her father has no intention of staying with them forever, and he was actually relishing his newfound solitude, as well as his secret companionship with Mrs Bagchi, a woman he met on his travels to Europe. The story ends with Ruma discovering her father's postcard to Mrs Bagchi, thus realising the existence of her father's secret relationship after his departure and, at the same time, understanding the emotional chasm and the unspoken intimacy that shaped her relationship with him.

"Unaccustomed Earth" prepares its readers to observe hospitality in terms of a negotiated domestic arrangement. The father never plans to stay with Ruma based on an assured familial ethic, in fact, he is testing the conditions of Ruma's welcome in the same manner as Ruma is testing him. Father is also given the stature of a self-conscious arrivant; he is cautious, monitors his environment and adjusts at all times in response to what he believes is unpredictable reception he is experiencing. Hospitality is marked by a tension between invitation and visitation; an invited guest is always a subject experiencing the conditional laws. On the other hand, a visitor is devoid of the laws governing conditionality; in this case, the sovereignty of the host is challenged and tested. "Unaccustomed Earth" presents a situation where the father is invited, even though the invitation is unsettled to a point that the father's presence in their

household carries a certain sense of unease, often associated with that of a stranger. The paradox tailored out from the complex relationship of the father-daughter relationship in this story generates a doubled economy of conditional hospitality. In addition to the filial obligations, Ruma is carrying a certain sense of anxiety with her father sharing her house. But what the text also often hints at is that the father is also aware of this anxiety, and he senses the revocability of his space in the house at any point. For this reason, he tries to keep a part of himself hidden from the household.

The text prepares its reader for this structure even before the father arrives. In her conversation with her father, Ruma says, “You’re always welcome here, Baba. You know you don’t have to ask” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 5), but this instance is undercut when the text contrasts it with Ruma’s mother, who would not take any prior permission before coming for a stay at her daughter’s household. The language of welcome is voiced here, and Father, acting accordingly, sensing this, has already revealed his entry into the household as no longer self-evident. The situation presented here clearly denotes the rhetoric or practice gap in its earliest form. The tension observed between the host and the guest is the fundamental contradiction in the structure of welcoming the other. According to Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000/1997),

[T]here would be an antinomy, an insoluble antinomy, a non-dialectizable antinomy between, on the one hand, The law of unlimited hospitality (to give the new arrival all of one’s home and oneself, to give him or her one’s own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition), and on the other hand, the laws (in the plural), those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional, as they are defined... across the family, civil society, and the State. (p. 77)

For Ruma this visit is less a reunion and more a pressure that reinforces conditionality, and the text explicitly presents this ambivalence, stating that she “feared that her father would become a responsibility ... [and] not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 8). The unstated condition with which the father is welcomed is that he must not become permanent, dependent, or burdensome. At this point the text especially hints at the two contrasts at play: how ideal familial hospitality should look and what the actual emotional state of the family is. Ruma exhibits the fear of annexation, though her outward reactions paint otherwise. She is seen vexing over the idea that her father’s continued stay might dismantle her entire family structure: “[It] would mean an end to the family she’d created on her own: herself and Adam and Akash, and the second child that would come in January, conceived just before the move” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 8). This attitude exhibited by Ruma can be equated with the Derridean concept, where the household’s stability is entirely upon the host, who is the one person capable of preserving the sovereignty over its use as well as its future composition.

The father’s arrival scene in the text explicitly vouches for a negotiated entry that is observed in the earlier part of the text. As Lahiri (2008) writes, “Ruma had offered to drive to the airport and greet her father, but he insisted on renting a car and following directions off the Internet” (p. 10). This practical detail points at how his self-transportation is also a form of self-management; this in many ways signals various measures taken by him to reduce the burden of his arrival, as well as pre-empting any dependence that makes his presence more precarious. Upon his arrival, the scene is further complicated with signs of strain. Ruma is seen tidying the living room, picking up Akash’s toys, and when Father arrives, Akash fails to recognise him. Father also struggles with the suitcase over the gravel before picking it up and walking across the grass. The presence of bodily effort is evident in these scenes, making hospitality a less settled welcome than an entrance managed on both sides.

Once inside Ruma’s home, Father behaves more like a guest than like an entitled elder, and his actions

denote those of a guest who is more than aware of the fact that his continued inclusion is highly dependent on his tact, usefulness, and nonintrusion. The gardening episode is a clear example of this. When Ruma plans to take him out, he declines, stating, "I was just hoping for a vacation from my vacations" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 33). At the same time, he drives out the next morning alone, finds a nursery and returns with pastries and the proposal to work on the yard: "I can plant a few shrubs, some ground covering if you like" (p. 42). The act of gardening is not entirely therapeutic but a clear case of contribution for the space he is occupying in their home; rather than simply occupying a space, he volunteers to contribute and to improve it and make himself useful. This unspoken condition attached to welcome is often studied beyond Derrida; for instance, beyond the philosophical ideal, domestic hospitality is often lived as a regime of reciprocity, obligation, and guest management rather than pure generosity (Lashley, 2015, p. 4; Lashley & Morrison, 2000, p. 11). Lahiri handles this with a greater sense of emotional delicacy, where the father knows and handles situations even before someone ever voices them. His act of gardening is also a solid gesture that is supposed to cover for his stay in their house.

An inverse form of conditional hospitality can be observed in Father's concealment of his relationship with Mrs Bagchi. If Ruma ever withholds her unconditional welcome, the father answers with a parallel act of reserve; he doesn't trust his daughter's house enough to bring his full present life into it, and the texts also clearly give an account of his feelings. It is important to note what he feels inside: "It was more difficult than he'd thought, being in his daughter's home, being around her all day. He felt pathetic deceiving her. ... All his life he'd felt condemned by her, on his wife's behalf" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 40). This explains why Father tends to act like a wary arrivant even though he was invited in the first place. He considers himself a judged survivor instead of taking his role as a loved father who gets invited into his daughter's household only as a result of the atmosphere morally shaped by the dead mother.

Derrida stated that conditional hospitality comes with the demand for legibility, name, origin, and purpose; and with the violence of oneself being answerable before the host's law. As Imperial (2020) observes, "The giver of hospitality is in a position of strength vis-à-vis the receiver in terms of ability and capacity as well as the willingness to give. It also entails a violence because it involves exclusion, policing and monitoring" (p. 131). However, Ruma's father resists this demand by being partially unreadable; he offers presence, conversation, and help but not full disclosure. Lahiri's story moves in both directions; Ruma shows it impossible to receive her father without conditions, but neither can her father entrust his present self unconditionally with her, thereby becoming both a host and a guest to each other, withholding full admission. The delayed disclosure about Mrs Bagchi at the end happens only after the father has left the place completely when he is no longer vulnerable to the immediate response, framing his visit as a negotiation he knew he might lose for sure. It is also a sovereignty tell, as the daughter's judgement no longer affects or alters the terms of co-presence. Lahiri thus renders the family home as a place where welcome is extended only under conditions subtle enough to pass for care. The story "Hell-Heaven" takes this logic further forward by staging the concept of welcome as a mutual negotiation wherein the two parties involved are tracing a slow-staged withdrawal, a transition from warmth to drifting, and to a formal cessation of invitation. The ending of Hell-Heaven is even more intense, showing how revocation need not be a single act to be total in effect.

"Hell-Heaven" follows the daughter of a Bengali immigrant family in Cambridge named Usha; her mother, Aparna; her father, Shyamal Da; and Pranab Kaku, a close family friend who becomes almost like an uncle to Usha. For a family living in an alien land, Pranab brings in companionship and warmth and an emotional closeness to home. It was Aparna who grew especially attached to his presence in the family, and she almost treated him like an insider. Over time the text evidently dictates that a closeness is seen developing between Aparna and Pranab Kaku, and as Usha observes, this closeness has led to an emotional

distance in her parents' marriage. The watershed movement in the story takes its form with Pranab revealing his relationship with the American woman named Deborah. He later marries her, breaking Aparna's heart, and Usha becomes a silent observer to all this. The story ends with Usha reflecting on different complicated emotions that make up life as a whole.

Hospitality's instability can be clearly demonstrated by analysing "Hell-Heaven", where the guest, who, unlike in "Unaccustomed Earth" is not even a blood relative, is granted full access into the household only to be revoked for his life decisions. The conditionality associated with belonging, and Derridean distinction between Law and laws of hospitality is explicitly present here. The text initially emphasises on showcasing the space that Pranab Kaku occupied in their household. Lahiri describes how his initial visit opens up a space for the several visits that followed: "... he showed up for dinner almost every night, occupying the fourth chair at our square Formica kitchen table and becoming a part of our family in practice as well as in name" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 61). The fourth chair denotes a language of practice and not any legal adoption or incorporation. It suggests that the household has already performed kinship before any justifications based on blood ties. Even Pranab is fed with such care; when he first arrives, upon knowing that he hasn't gotten a chance to eat a proper Bengali meal in months, the narrator's mother serves him leftover curried mackerel and rice (Lahiri, 2008, p. 61). The welcome here is not only polite but also materially sustaining and intimate as well as culturally fluent. Or, otherwise, in Derridean terms, it resembles the rhetoric of the unconditional welcome, as it is not based on any material gain and it expects nothing in return but his presence.

Lahiri initially used Aparna's reorganisation of her domestic routine as a means to represent Pranab Kaku's inclusion into the household. Aparna, who is described as restless and always in search of new ways to escape from her own house, suddenly starts to act like a new person after Pranab starts visiting them regularly. As Lahiri (2008) writes about how the guest's arrival transformed Aparna's routine entirely:

rolling out dough for luchis, which she [Aparna] normally made only on Sundays for my father and me, or putting up new curtains she'd bought at Woolworth's. I did not know, back then, that Pranab Kaku's visits were what my mother looked forward to all day, that she changed into a new sari and combed her hair in anticipation of his arrival, and that she planned, days in advance, the snacks she would serve him with such nonchalance. (p. 63)

These acts from the side of the host make Pranab Kaku's visits crucial, as they are anticipated, staged, and domestically prepared for in advance, in turn making them not passive hospitality but an active investment capable of reshaping the nuances of the entire household.

This investment gets further complicated after observing the contrast present between the two men in the story: Pranab Kaku and Shyamal Da. The character traits of Shyamal da can be contrasted with that of Pranab Kaku in every possible sense. A man of routine and emotional reserve, Shyamal da "was a lover of silence and solitude. ... He was wedded to his work ... and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate. ... he disliked excess in anything" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 65). Pranab Kaku, on the other hand, is expansive, improvisatory, and visibly animated in the household. He is shown eating ravisly, speaking freely, and even engaging Aparna in playful exchanges over films, music, and memory (Lahiri, 2008, pp. 62-65). One couldn't help but notice the emotional reciprocity between Aparna and Pranab was far more compared to that of Aparna and Shyamal da. This stark difference in behaviour between the two men can also be considered as another reason for the welcome Pranab secured so easily in their household. This makes his presence less a tolerated company and more a compensatory emotional presence.

Deborah's introduction into the household is where the text takes a turn from its linear narrative; it is also a

point from which the limits of welcome start to get tested. She turns out to be an outsider whose accommodation is made possible only as long as she keeps the emotional hierarchy of the household safe. Aparna says, "In a few weeks, the fun will be over and she'll leave him" (Lahiri, 2008, p. 68), hinting at their relationship going south, underscoring how the family took no time in classifying Deborah's presence as provincial. This also hints at how Pranab Kaku's role in the household is also going to end if he doesn't cut loose his bonds with Deborah. The boundaries within the household are in a continuous state of motion; they are wounded, unwounded, and rewounded in response to the existing social and emotional pressures, and it is with the arrival of Deborah that this movement becomes most visible. Once Pranab's attachment to Deborah hardens into marriage, Aparna's earlier generosity gives way to withdrawal, making it evident that the hospitality showered earlier never came without expectations; that it was always accompanied with conditionality.

Aparna was the one who was most impacted by the marriage between Pranab and Deborah. She shows signs of withdrawal; she stopped entertaining Pranab's presence in their household as swiftly as possible. This speed in reversal is itself the sovereignty tell. The change in Aparna's behaviour is presented through emotional exclusion and social silence. Here the host's authority is represented not through overt command but through a sudden cooling of feelings. The affection and space provided to Pranab stay if and only if he stays within the invisible bonds of acceptability. The narrator, Usha, becomes the silent observer of this dissonance, and this perspective from the child preserves the practice gap in its purest form. What Usha has learned about Pranab's place in their household changed with his one life choice. Though Pranab is not literally or violently expelled from the household, he is displaced from the emotional centre of the family, showing how conditional intimacy expects you to stay within the expectations of the family.

Towards the end, as the story progresses, we see how a presence that was considered central to the family's emotional life fades into the background. The gradual estrangement drives the story to its ending as it prepares its reader to view hospitality not as a stable bond but as a contingent and revisable arrangement. The story comes to its emotional ending with Deborah, who is divorced from Pranab after twenty-three years of marriage, now accepted back into Aparna's life, while Pranab remains permanently as an outsider, confirming the terms of welcome were never fixed in the first place. "Hell-Heaven" thus becomes the most important candidate to present the logic of Derridean hospitality into the domestic sphere with the utmost precision. The family's acceptance of the guest fully coincides with the "Law of unconditional welcome", but the laws governing that welcome depend on keeping him absorbable.

Taken together, the two selected short stories of Lahiri, "Unaccustomed Earth" and "Hell-Heaven", disclose the same structural truth from the opposite ends of the kinship spectrum. It is evident that welcome in Lahiri's fiction remains conditional even if the guest is a father bound by blood or a family intimate unbound by blood relations. This comparison remains crucial to the entire analysis as it overturns the assumption that kinship proximity secures belonging. In Lahiri's fictional world, blood does not erase the threshold; it only changes the form through which the threshold is negotiated. One major linkage the two stories share is clearly the gap between the language of belonging and the practice of welcome. When Ruma tells her father that he is always welcome to stay, the narration also records her reluctance in accepting him completely if he decides to stay with her forever. But Pranab Kaku is made part of the family in practice as well as in name, but the unwritten rule that proves otherwise in the later part of the story is that his welcome only remains as long as he abides by the domestic and cultural terms that the family follows. Both the father's quiet reserve and Pranab Kaku's emotional rupture differ in mode, but hospitality in both cases has always stayed conditional. The host accepts only under certain conditions and the host always wields a certain set of power that can limit or revoke the welcome at any point. By recasting the family home as a threshold rather than a sanctuary, Lahiri forces her reader to see the nature

of hospitality as not broken by the family's failure but structurally unstable within the family itself.

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