The Impact of Reverse Culture Shock on Gulliver’s Family Life

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ARTICLE DETAILS

ABSTRACT

Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels has been one of the most fascinating works of English literature. It is its suggestive quality due to which it has been read in a variety of different perspectives. Twentieth century critics have read it in the light of different psychoanalytical approaches. This study focuses on an entirely different aspect i.e reverse culture shock. It analyzes the effects of reverse culture shock on Gulliver’s behavior and his interaction with his family through a close reading of the text of Gulliver’s Travels. Gulliver who suffers from an obvious identity crisis fails to cope with the readjustment problems at home after living among different hosts. After every subsequent re-entry, Gulliver’s behavior especially with his family members deteriorates. The imprints of his last hosts remain so deeply engraved on his mind that fails to live peacefully with his family members and has to live in isolation. This is where we can relate Gulliver to people who after living abroad fail to adjust with the people of their native society and family members.

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DOI: 10.26710/jbsee.v6i1.1071

1. Introduction

Gulliver’s personality is deeply affected by reverse culture shock. It not only affects his behavior but also his relationship with his family members. On each re-entry, his behavior displays obvious marks of the impact of his hosts’ culture on his mind. Gulliver’s association with his wife and children reflects a slow but progressive deterioration on every subsequent return from his four voyages. Whenever he arrives among his own people, he follows the thought pattern of his hosts. His manner and behavior remain incompatible to the physical reality that prevails in his native land. As family is the nearest unit to mix up with, it becomes the most accessible target of Gulliver’s behavior. The Gulliver who shows some sense of responsibility to his family after his return from his first voyage is transformed into a Gulliver who prefers to live with animals instead of his wife and children. His identity crisis gradually deteriorates during his stay with different hosts and causes serious problems upon his re-entry to his native land. He constantly
remains under the impact of reverse culture shock after his return from Houyhnhnmland which is why he isolates himself from his family members in specific and society in general. With the introduction of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century, *Gulliver’s Travels* has remained a source of fascination for several critics. Most of them deride Swift; some criticize him for his focus onanity to uncover the problems of human nature.ii They highlight the marks of perversity in Gulliver and his abnormal behavior in order to explore what Swift is actually up to. However, they analyze the text by focusing more on the author instead of Gulliver. For instance, Ben Karpman reads the scatological references in *Gulliver’s Travels*. He disapproves of such instances in the text and blames Swift for being obsessed with defecation and excremental allusions. He is of the view that such passages do not help to enhance the bitterness of Swift’s satire.iii Greenacre holds that Swift’s anal fixation has been serious and his sexual desires are impaired which is indicative of a “total retreat from genital sexuality”. To her, Swift manifests anal characteristics and extreme pleasure in “dirt and excreta”. She believes that Swift reflects extreme type of anxiety that relates to “severe castration complex” (92).iv In Ferenczi’s opinion, Gulliver’s fantasies of being among giants and pigmies are symptomatic of “genital inadequacy of a person whose sexual activities have been inhibited by intimidation and fixations in early childhood” (59). For him, Gulliver’s act of urination on Queen’s chamber reflects “child’s idea of sexual intercourse” (52).v Dr. Khattak, however, analyzes *Gulliver’s Travels* from Jungian perspective and reads Gulliver’s character through the lens of Jungian psychoanalytical theory. He looks at Gulliver as an extroverted and one-sided personality who remains under the influence of external world and thus fails to establish connection with his inner world. He asserts that Gulliver lacks self-knowledge which is why he suffers a great deal during his four voyages. Critics have contributed a great deal in interpreting *Gulliver’s Travels*. However, none of them has so far analyzed Gulliver’s behavior under the impact of reverse culture shock though there are clear indications that Gulliver undergoes such effects. This study analyzes the effects of reverse culture shock on Gulliver’s personality and behavior after each subsequent re-entry with a specific focus on how it affects his relationship with his family. It also analyzes how under the effects of reverse culture shock Gulliver’s identity problem, and how his behavior deteriorates with his family and the society around him. It is at this point that Gulliver’s character becomes more pertinent to those people who after spending a few years abroad fail to adjust among their native people, especially with their family members. The study probes why and how Gulliver fails to cope with effects of reverses culture shock. It also investigates why Gulliver keeps on getting away from his family after each re-entry, and what forces him to shun away from his family and society. My methodology is based on close textual analysis of the text of *Gulliver’s Travels* and certain secondary sources based on the views of various critics.

Gulliver is unable to grasp and adopt the internal culture of his subsequent hosts. Despite dwelling among them, he only adopts and adjusts to the external and cosmetic aspects of their culture. His interaction with his hosts helps him develop a shallow level of understanding about them. Price holds a similar opinion; he believes that Gulliver is used to “…surface observation and produces the kind of understatement that neglects completely the overtones of an experience…” (95).vi He never learns from his personal experience that each culture has its own peculiarities and parameters. He fails to see the mind of Brobdingnagian emperor; he cannot understand the Brobdingnagians’ thought pattern. Likewise, he interacts with the Lilliputians, but he is unable to see how cunning and opportunist they are. He lacks the penetrating vision to comprehend the problems of the Laputans who like him are driven in one dimension. Though he is impressed with the Houyhnhnms, he merely imitates them and fails to inculcate the essence of their internal culture. While adopting the superficial aspects of his host, he is least aware that his native culture is based on a different thought pattern, and that his hosts’ way of life is grossly incompatible to that of his native land. As a result, on every subsequent re-entry, he faces problems of readjustment. Besides, his deteriorating identity crisis makes things more difficult to handle. Especially, when he returns from Houyhnhnmland, we find him in a different frame of mind. He does not show any signs of growth in his personality. We get least impressions of his emotional, behavariol and psychological maturity; he is dissatisfied and unhappy. Never do we find him at peace; he is always agitated and disturbed which is why his re-adjustment at home as well in his native society becomes impossible. And
thus he not only turns out to be a misfit in his home but also in his native society.

Gulliver’s short stay at home, after his re-entry from the first two voyages, manifests the initial stages of the effects of reverse culture shock. After his departure from Blefuscu, he boards the ship in an excited mood but he is unaware of what the people around feel about him. He is unaware of the change that he has undergone during his stay among the Lilliputians. His excitement and happiness while returning homeland manifest his yearning to be at his home. Surprisingly, however, he hardly spends “two Months” (68) with his family and leaves for another voyage. For an experienced person, the outer world can never be a very strong fascination to disturb the peacefulness of family life. However, Gulliver expects to be treated like a ‘Nardac’ and ‘Man Mountain’—the way he was treated by the Lilliputians. His family being unaware of what he has gone through in Lilliput treats him the way they used to treat him before he visited Lilliput. A responsible father and husband would prefer to be with his family, to solve their problems on the spot and to look after them. In real sense, it is the moral and emotional support that the family members expect of a father and husband. Fulfilling financial needs of family is of secondary importance as compared to the sense of security provided by his personal presence. But Gulliver prefers providing physical comforts to his family. This is why he hardly shows any consideration for the emotional needs of his family, but make sure to provide sufficient finances to cater their physical needs. He presents himself as a patron who addresses only the superficial aspects of his dependents and shows no concern about their real needs. He arranges “fifteen Hundred Pounds” along with “Thirty Pound a Year” and “a good house in Redriff” (68) for his family and then leaves for another voyage despite “Tears on both sides” (69) at the time of departure.

According to Gullahorn and Gullahorn, returnees who have developed a clear perception of themselves manage the problems associated with re-entry quite easily. However, those whose identity is in a constant flux suffer more, and mostly find the situation beyond their control. Being alienated from his innerself, Gulliver remains unconscious of his own actions and needs. As a result, he is unable to show any understanding for human behavior and feelings, which is why he fails to understand what his family needs. The effects of reverse culture shock debilitate his psychic enlargement and growth. His children are in growing age, they need his presence: his son is in “Grammar School”, and his daughter is at her “Needle-Work” (68). They need him to be with them as a moral and emotional support in this phase of their lives. But he is under the influence of his previous hosts. He is supposed to reconcile himself with the physical reality around him which is possible only if he analyzes the change of environment and people around him, and grasp the demand of time. But he appears to be in a state of denial; he appears to assume as if he is still a giant among pigmies though the physical reality speaks otherwise.

This kind of behavior is seen again when Gulliver returns from Brobdingnag. His senses remain attuned to the cue and signs of Brobdingnagians culture due to which he adopts certain behavioral aspects of his giant hosts. Cock asserts that after Gulliver returns from the land of giants, most of his problems pertain to perceptual adjustment which results in his disoriented behavior. He bends “down to go in (like a Goose under a Gate)” (144) and bows down to his wife’s knees “thinking she could otherwise never be able to reach [his] mouth” (145). Naturally, his family’s response to such behavior must be based on confusion and worry. Instead of adopting affectionate way to interact with his wife, he complains that she has “starved herself and her Daughter” and has been “too thrifty” (145). Given his changed way of interacting with people around, it is plausible to believe that he must have said it in a loud and wild manner—which is what the Captain and his crew observe about him. Such strange response must have caused shocking effects on his wife who has been looking after his two children during his long absence from home. Discouraging reactions from husbands create alienation between the spouses both at emotional and physical level which cause strained ties between them. Most probably this is what happens between Gulliver and his wife. The very initial interaction between them creates a sense of alienation before they get close to each other. After such a long separation, they must share their experiences and the problems that they might have gone through. It seems that both are inaudible and unreachable to each other. Being trapped in a painful situation, Gulliver cannot make others understand him neither does he
understand them. He hardly seems to have been at peace during his stay at home. The two possible options are to withdraw himself from the people around or to plan for going overseas again. As it is difficult to have a complete withdrawal from his family and other acquaintances, the option of going overseas appears more acceptable. This is why Captain Robinson finds it easy to persuade him to join his ship offering him various benefits and privileges. The main issue is to “persuade [his] wife” (149) who halfheartedly let him go after protesting against his decision. Seemingly, Gulliver’s strange behavior has ensued in bitterness between him and his wife from the very outset of his re-entry which persists till the day he departs for another voyage.

Moreover, Gulliver fails to utilize his time on his voyage back home despite the company of Captain Wilcocks whom he considers “an honest worthy” (139) man. He is unable to overcome the effects of the experience after his re-entry to his native land. Since locked in the moment, he is not conscious of what he misses about his hosts. Apparently he is normal, but he is not at peace while being at home. Maybe he misses the love and care with which Glumdulclitch looked after him for two years. But his family and friends are least aware of what he has gone through and what he expects of them. They are unable to locate the ‘lack’ that Gulliver desperately needs to fill in. Perhaps his misses the care, love and tender treatment with which Glumdulclitch looks after him. Though Gulliver feels to have managed “right Understanding” (145) with his family and friends, yet he cannot stay there anymore and decides to leave for another voyage. There seems to be a communication gap between him and his family, especially in case of his wife who does not agree with him to leave again as she and the grown up children need his presence at home. Gulliver assumes that his wife and other acquaintances, like captain Wilcocks, consider him to have “lost [his] Wits” (145) though it is never mentioned that they think so. It is out of his own “Habit and Prejudice” (145) that he assumes them to have such negative thoughts about him. Such misunderstanding along with breakdown in communication affects his ties with his wife and friends. The gap between him and the ‘other’ widens resulting in more misunderstanding between them. He cannot endure such circumstances these are beyond his control. Conversely to his departure for Brobdingnag when both had tears in their eyes, this time the couple sees each other off with an unpleasant note.

Gulliver’s re-entry after voyage to Laputa is different from the previous three re-entries. Unlike the other three voyages back, he desists providing any details about the Captain of the ship while voyaging back from Laputa. He also avoids giving details about his interaction with the crew on board. It appears that he remains isolated from the crew as he does while he is on ship taking him home from Houyhnhnmland. He provides little detail about his stay at home after his re-entry despite spending five months at home. Surprisingly, after his re-entry from the previous two voyages, he remains home for shorter duration of time but he provides more information about his interaction with his family. On this occasion, however, his silence makes his re-entry quite mysterious. His interaction with the strange inhabitants in Laputa and Balnibarbi causes repulsion in him which results in a feeling of boredom. But his interaction with the Struldbrugs and the ghosts, he seems to have undergone a major change in his views about human beings. One can see the deep impacts of these events in the long term silence that he adopts on his way back on ship and then at home after his re-entry. It is obvious that his thought pattern and way of thinking have undergone a major shift. This change in Gulliver’s outlook not only affects his five months long stay at home but also his stay among the Houyhnhnms in his subsequent voyage.

As a result, Gulliver appears to be in a state of inertia; he seems to have surrendered to loneliness and passivity. He spends “five Months in a happy Condition” (223), but he does not specify what makes him feel happy in the company of his family. Perhaps this unusual happiness comes out of the sensual pleasure, but that proves out to be a temporary one. As he cannot enjoy love making after he impregnates his wife, he decides to embark on another voyage. He never mentions how he has been enjoying the company of his family: whether he takes his family out to spend quality time or he is busy with them sharing how he spends those five lonely years. Though he acknowledges—as an afterthought—that he “could have learned the Lesson of knowing when [he] was well” (223) happy, he never realizes it consciously when he is among his children and wife. In other words, he remains unaware of what he is
going through. A responsible husband and father would not let his wife unattended with a baby in her womb. He would stay till the baby is delivered and wife restored to normal routine. But Gulliver, instead of doing so, accepts “an advantageous Offer” (223) to captain a ship. It implies that he is not happy internally and is dissatisfied with his own circumstances. Resultantly, he prefers to alienate himself from his kids and wife which makes his earlier statement, of being happy with his family, quite ridiculous.

Gulliver is emotional and shrouded in disillusionment when he is banished from Houyhnhnmland mainly because the Houyhnhnms abstain to accept him to their society. He hates Yahoos and anyone who is like them. He adores the Houyhnhnms due to their rationality and their devotion to reason. However, his behavior and way of thinking are in complete contradiction to what he claims to have learnt in their company. Instead of inculcating their rationality in his thinking and behavior, he simply copies the superficial aspects of their physical behavior. He is swayed away by a strong fit of emotional behavior. His emotional disillusionment about human race makes him look for an island uninhabited by any human being. Certainly, one gets surprised to see Gulliver completely forgetful about Yahoos when he comes across some native “Savages”—children and women—(293). Just a couple of days ago, he could see human beings in Yahoos and Yahoos in the latter. But he fails to see Yahoos in the human inhabitants of the island he intends to stay. Their human forms and savage behavior do not remind him of anything about Yahoos. Gulliver is disoriented; most probably because he is unable to absorb the grief and pain of his banishment. When he finds himself surrounded by the crew, he introduces himself as a “poor Yahoo banished from Houyhnhnmland”. Ironically, he wants to be a Houyhnhnm but introduces himself as a Yahoo. His hatred for human beings increases when he confronts the crew; he trembles “all the while betwixt Fear and Hatred”. The crew talking to him appears like “a Dog or Cow should speak in England or a Yahoo in Houyhnhnmland” (294). Gulliver is emotional, disillusioned and confused. The inconsistency in his outlook and behavior marks a clear sign of his deteriorating identity crisis. Had he reflected and analyzed his own behavior, he would have benefitted from his last voyage. But he is unable to do so. Owing to his disconnection from his inner world, he never realizes who he is and what he does.

On Gulliver’s final re-entry, we find him with an entirely different psychological perspective. He is different from the Gulliver whom his family saw off five years ago. Gulliver appears apprehensive on his return home instead of being excited to meet his wife and children. It is with a new born but worsened identity that he arrives with. This makes him see everyone and everything in a different perspective. His family seems symbolically right when they assume him dead due to his long absence as he has returned in the old body but with a newly acquired identity which is severely prejudiced against human beings. The overlapping impact of reverse culture shock and his worsening identity crisis makes Gulliver react appallingly towards his children and wife. He is full of compunction to have fathered human children and is overtaken by “utmost Shame, Confusion, and Horror” (298). This is the nadir to which a father and a head of family can stoop down. This is his newly acquired identity which carries hatred for what he has begotten. He is simply being out of his own control as Weaver would say. Surely, with such an outlook, he cannot enjoy to stay with his family. Resultantly, he prefers to live away from them and other human beings. So intensely is he obsessed with his love for Houyhnhnms that “The first Money that [he] laid out was to buy two young Stone-Horses” (298). Seldom does he bother to ask about his child who was conceived during his stay at home before he departs for Houyhnhnmland.

Gulliver’s newly acquired identity is beyond the understanding of his family members due to which he is unable to settle down with them. To him, it is less a family reunion and more a direct interaction with Yahoos. Perhaps this is why he “Swoon for an Hour” (298) when he is embraced by his wife at his arrival. To his family, his return is not less than a miracle as they considered him dead during his prolonged absence. In such circumstances, both the parties, despite being close, are so distant that they cannot hear and understand each other. As a result, during the first year of his re-entry, Gulliver is unable to “endure [his] Wife or Children in [his] Presence” (298). The family does not enjoy each other’s company as they never dine together. Even after five years of his re-entry, his wife and children “dare not presume to touch [his] Bread, or drink out of the same Cup”, neither are they allowed to touch him “by
the Hand” (298). Instead, Gulliver feels more contented in the company of his horses. He says:

…I feel my spirits revived by the smell he contracts in the stable. My Horses understand me tolerably well; I converse with them at least four Hours every Day. They are strangers to Bridle or Saddle; they live in great Amity with me and Friendship to each other (298).

This kind of behavior must be incomprehensible to his family members. Though not mentioned in the text, it must be torturous for his children to see their father accompanying animals instead of being with them. He is dissatisfied with his children who according to him are least interested in what he says. One is certainly reminded of how he would prefer “to pass the remainder of [his] Days with [his] Wife and Family” (206). Such a Gulliver is no longer visible to the readers as he has undergone a psychological death-rebirth process after his stay among the Houyhnhnms. Thus, we find him a different Gulliver who is full of contempt for his family. The little change that we observe in him is when after five years of his return he dines with his wife while she sits “at the farthest End of a long Table; and to answer (but with the utmost Brevity) the few Questions [he] asked her” (304). However, his contempt for human beings does not mitigate; he does not feel at ease with many people visiting him, and most probably with his family, due to which after five years he alienates himself from his domestic and social circles and moves to Newark. Brady observes that “… in his final exile in England he more or less thinks he is a Houyhnhnm, or at least a horse” (7). Raschio opines that the returnees’ readjustment issues range from mild emotional disturbance to long term sense of isolation. They look at their own culture as an outsider as they find it conflicting with their hosts’ culture. Werkman finds the returnees feeling dissatisfied, restless, rootless and nostalgic for the life style and company they enjoyed in the host country. The sense of loss and inability to share their experiences with the people around creates a gap to develop a normal understanding with family, friends and the surrounding people. In such a state, feelings of dislocation prevail over the returnee and naturally the family members, being the nearest, are bound to bear the brunt.

Gulliver’s re-entry is a moment of great jubilation for his family. Certainly, they are excited to find him among them once again. However, they are unable to see the “Hatred, Disgust and Contempt” and “Shame, Confusion and Horror” (298) which take control of him the moment he faces them. His family must have observed the change in his behavior and outlook during the first year of his re-entry since he completely alienates himself from their company. He confesses that he “could not endure [his] Wife or Children in [his] Presence” (298) during the first year. His family member must have felt being treated like apartheid: they are not allowed to physically touch his meals nor his personal utensils. They are least aware of the psychological and behavioral changes which he has undergone. Also, his grown up kids must have developed repulsion for him. His wife must be willing and trying to restore the previous equation of their relationship but perhaps Gulliver proves out to be a hard nut to crack as he expects them to silently follow his way of thinking and thought pattern. In a way, Gulliver tries to brainwash his family members; he wants them to think and act as he does. The little flexibility that he shows to his wife seems to be a feeble urge to reconcile relationship with his wife and children, but the magic spell of Houyhnhnms still proves to be stronger than the love of his family. He appears be in a numb pain which he feels but fails to locate.

Under the impact of reverse culture shock and his worsened identity crisis, Gulliver is unable to show any signs of improvement in his outlook about human race. He imitates Houyhnhnms and desires everyone to see things as he sees it. Instead of changing his thought pattern, he wants the whole English race to change theirs. He prefers the company of “those two degenerate Houyhnhnms [he] keeps in [his] Stable” (xxxviii) instead of human company. The contempt he holds for human beings and his countrymen cannot be eradicated. To him, human race is beyond any reform. Ironically, seldom does he analyze himself in the same parameter. Given his extrovert outlook, Gulliver is unable to look into his inner self, and thus driven by superficial aspects of events and things around him. For him, the physical resemblance of Yahoos and human beings signifies that both, the latter and former, are one and same. He has become more of a spectacle for the people who visit him “out of Curiosity”. Clearly, the “Concourse
of curious People” (xxxviii) forces him to move away from Redriff to Newark. At this stage, he should have reflected about himself that why he has become a curiosity for the people. But, as mentioned, it is only possible if he connects himself to his inner world which is beyond his reach. He remembers only the positive aspects of Houyhnhnms and turns oblivious to their narrow and limited outlook. Conversely, he overlooks the positives of human race and focuses only on their weaknesses. His identity problem has trapped him; his thought pattern makes him think narrowly. Without realizing that he has undergone a huge identity shift, he wants to impose his identity on others. This disturbs the whole equation of relationship with the people around, and thus he retires and alienates himself.

We live in a world where we come across ‘Gullivers’ on daily basis. We see how after their re-entry after long separation from their families, the returnees fail to settle peacefully with their families and society. Such returnees, like Gulliver, feel uncomfortable as they carry deep imprints of their hosts’ cultural parameters. They never have the depth to realize that they are no more among their hosts. They want their family members and people around to think and look at the people, events, and happening from their perspective which is next to impossible. We hear about people who divorce their wives or commit suicide. We see many returnees opting for a life in isolation since they are completely misfit in their native society. Gulliver’s character relates to all those returnees who face problems of readjustment with their families on their re-entry after staying abroad for long time.

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According to him, an individual’s sense of identity plays a significant role during teenage. However, he dispels the idea that the growth and development of identity is just confined to adolescence. He asserts that it is a lifelong process as people come across new trails, and experience unexpected scenarios. To him, identity crisis is a time when one goes through an intensive analysis and exploration of different ways of looking at oneself. He further adds that people who manage to resolve the crisis can easily face challenging circumstances in their future. Since the changing world requires a constant effort from people to redefine themselves, they may face recurring of identity crisis. In such a scenario, people remain unclear and uncertain which is why their identity becomes insecure. They feel confused about who they are, and what their role is, and what their aims are.


\[\text{3 For details see, Ben Karpman, ”Neurotic Traits of Jonathan Swift as Revealed by Gulliver’s Travels,” Psychoanalytic Review, Vol. 29 (1942): pp. 30-31.} \]
All subsequent references to the text of *Gulliver’s Travels* have been taken from the mentioned edition of the text through page numbers.


**Works cited**


