

Marital Relationships in diaspora: A Study of the Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Marriage is not just a social institution but a dynamic site where issues like identity, gender and migration and emotional intimacy intersect. Marriage is an important theme in Lahiri's writings and it is not always presented as an idealized union but rather as a continuously evolving relationship. Lahiri's fiction reveals that gender roles can further complicate marriages as they can put additional burden on women. For immigrant women, patriarchy and cultural-conflict intersect together to create new dimensions in their marital life.

This article examines the representation of marital relationships in Lahiri's short stories from the collection *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* to highlight how marriage functions not only as a source of companionship but also as a site of conflict and emotional distance. By foregrounding everyday domestic experiences, Lahiri reveals that a marriage cannot flourish without mutual understanding and emotional intimacy.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, marriage, gender, identity, immigrant

Introduction

Marriage is both an intimate relationship and a social institution. Literary representations of marriage have highlighted both its merits and demerits. In diasporic settings, marital relationships become even more complicated as they assume their shape under the influence of migration, cultural-conflict and identity crisis. Diasporic literature of Jhumpa Lahiri present these complications in a subtle yet profound way and in Lahiri's fiction, we rarely come across romanticized portrayal of marriage. Lahiri avoids relying on dramatic conflicts or extraordinary events. She rather constructs narratives from common everyday interactions and domestic settings that seem ordinary and simple but reveal the profound emotional complexities. Lahiri also highlights the emotional consequences of migration within intimate relationships and how migration transforms everyday domestic experiences and puts disproportionate emotional responsibilities on women. Women in diaspora often act as preservers of cultures by preparing traditional food, performing cultural rituals and teaching kids their native language. Women also sacrifice personal ambitions to ensure the stability of their family.

Lahiri's fiction also explores the ways in which the understanding of marriage differs between the first-generation immigrants and the second generation immigrants. While the first-generation immigrants often understand marriage as a lifelong commitment that requires a lot of adjustments and compromises, for their children marriage is a bond that can be broken if it fails to offer emotional fulfilment and companionship.

Stories such as “A Temporary Matter,” “This Blessed House,” “Mrs. Sen’s,” and “Sexy,” from *Interpreter of Maladies* and “Hell-Heaven” and “Unaccustomed Earth” from *Unaccustomed Earth*, collectively represent the multiple dimensions of the marital experience. In these stories, we notice that while some marriages collapse due to emotional distance and lack of communication, others survive through negotiations and adaptations. We also come across individuals who experience emotional fulfilment outside marriage as well as individuals who discover that similar cultural values alone cannot guarantee a flourishing married life. Lahiri highlights that marriages often deteriorate due to ordinary moments of neglect and silences that accumulate over time and can lead to serious betrayals.

Interpreter of Maladies (1999) is the debut collection of Jhumpa Lahiri that explores the marital life of Indian immigrant women. “A Temporary Matter,” which is the opening story of *Interpreter of Maladies*, presents a profound exploration of the gradual breakdown of a marriage. Revolving around Shoba and Shukumar, the story reveals how grief and lack of communication can lead to emotional distance within a relationship. The marital relationship of Shoba and Shukumar begins to collapse after the stillbirth of their first child. They live together in the same house but their emotional worlds start to drift apart. They never talk to each other about their grief and they communicate only to make surface-level interactions. Without any melodrama, Lahiri portrays the quiet devastation that is inflicted upon intimate relationships due to unresolved trauma. The temporary power cuts compel them to dine together. In the darkness, they decide to confess their secrets to each other. Initially, it seems that the confessions will lead to the strengthening of their relationship. However, their final confessions make it absolutely clear that there is no scope for their patch up. As Gayathri Varma U points out, “It shows that the facade has ended and reality has dawned upon them that leave both, especially Shoba, at the peak of disillusionment” (46). Shoba reveals that she has rented a separate apartment and has decided to move out. Shukumar also discloses that he had held their stillborn child. He also reveals, “Our baby was a boy” (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 22).

The story ends with both Shoba and Shukumar weeping together which suggests that genuine communication does not always restore the relationship but it can bring clarity and can make it easier for people to end an emotionally paralysed relationship so that they can move forward with their lives.

Lahiri’s examination of how lack of communication can lead to a failed marriage and betrayal is further extended in the title story “Interpreter of Maladies”. The story revolves around the brief interaction between Mr. Kapasi and Mrs. Das. Mrs. Das is an immigrant woman who has come to India on a tour and Mr Kapasi is her tour guide. When we first come across the family of Mrs. Das, it appears to be modern and affluent. But gradually, it is revealed that the couple’s conversations lack affection and intimacy. At one point of time, when Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi are left alone, Mrs. Das reveals that she once had an extramarital affair through which her son Bobby was born. It was a secret that she had concealed from her husband for years. Her confession is a result of her desperate desire to be understood as she mistakenly imagines that Mr. Kapasi’s occupation as an interpreter for a physician will also enable him to interpret human suffering. This misunderstanding highlights the universal human desire for empathy. As Alessandro Monti points out, “The Interpreter cannot translate her words, that is, he cannot transfer her request for an explication into the responsibility of a full diagnosis” (87). Mrs. Das, whose marriage has failed to provide emotional fulfilment seeks intimacy from a stranger. Her confession to Mr. Kapasi not only exposes her inner guilt but also the emotional void that has overshadowed her marital relationship.

At the same time, Mr. Kapasi's own marriage has also started to deteriorate after the death of his young son which is another example of how grief creates emotional distance between spouses. He longs for companionship and recognition which is absent within his own domestic life as his wife makes fun of his occupation as an interpreter. When Mrs. Das shows appreciation towards his occupation as an interpreter of maladies, he becomes fascinated with her. However, his romantic fantasy collapses when Mrs. Das reduces him to the role of an emotional counsellor.

"Mrs. Sen" from *Interpreter of Maladies* is another poignant portrayal of an immigrant marriage. Through the experiences of Mrs. Sen, a young Indian wife adjusting to life in the United States, the story highlights the emotional consequences of migration. Told from the perspective of Eliot, the child that Mrs. Sen babysits, the story explores the emotional world of Mrs. Sen. Mrs. Sen, who has migrated to America because of her husband's academic career remains confined within the domestic sphere while her husband gets the opportunity to participate in public life due to his career.

Mrs. Sen's apartment is physically comfortable but it lacks the warmth and intimacy that surrounded the life of Mrs. Sen when she lived in India. Mrs. Sen constantly feels nostalgic for her hometown in India and recalls the family gatherings and communal food preparations that she witnessed there. Food acts as a significant symbol through which Mrs. Sen keeps the memory of her country alive. She chops vegetables with her traditional cutting blade that she brought from India and cooks traditional Indian food in order to recreate the fragments of her home in a foreign land. Thus, cooking and eating traditional food becomes an act of cultural preservation.

Mrs. Sen's failure to learn driving reflects her failure to assimilate in the Western society. However, one day, in order to buy fresh fish, Mrs. Sen decides to drive to the market with Eliot in her car. On her way, she meets with a minor accident. Eventually, Eliot's mother stops sending her to Mrs. Sen for babysitting.

Thus, the story critiques the patriarchal structure of marriage within diasporic marriages. While husbands who are first to move to the foreign country find it easier to assimilate in the foreign environment and have more opportunities to engage in social life through their career, their wives are usually confined to the domestic sphere which leads to their social isolation.

Another story, "Sexy" revolves around Miranda, an American woman involved in an extramarital affair with Dev who is a married Bengali man. Initially, Miranda romanticizes her relationship with Dev. She assumes that the attention that she is receiving from Dev is a sign of true affection. However, this illusion is eventually dismantled when she meets Dev's son. Dev's son calls Miranda sexy and when she asks him about the meaning of the word, he says, it means "loving someone you don't know" (Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* 107). This explanation seems innocent but it transforms Miranda's understanding of her affair with Dev. She ultimately decides to end her relationship with Dev.

Unaccustomed Earth (2008) is another short story collection by Lahiri that explores the lives of second and third generation of Indian immigrants. "Unaccustomed Earth" which is the opening story as well as the title story of the collection, exemplifies the complexities of married life of a second-generation Indian immigrant woman, Ruma. She is married to an American man, Adam. This cross-cultural marriage is not fully accepted by Ruma's parents. However, they never totally oppose it. Ruma's married life differs significantly from that of

her parents. Ruma's parents share a married life that is based on compromise and gender roles. As Mrinal Kanti Halder notes about the marital life of Ruma's parents, "Their marriage was all duties to each other" (15). Ruma's marriage on the other hand is based on mutual understanding and is not limited by the rigid gender roles. However, the marital harmony in Ruma's life does not prevent Ruma from the social and cultural burden created by migration, marriage and motherhood. After the birth of their son, Ruma has to sacrifice her legal career as despite the marital stability, she bears unequal burden of domestic and parental responsibilities.

Another story "Hell-Heaven," from this collection explores the emotional complexities of marital life in a diasporic setting through the experiences of Aparna. Aparna's daughter Usha is the narrator who witnesses Aparna's loneliness and her unfulfilled attachment to Pranab Chakraborty who is a family friend. Aparna's relationship with her husband lack compatibility and emotional intimacy. Aparna constantly feels isolated and lonely. The arrival of Pranab Chakraborty offers her a temporary form of attachment. Pranab not only offers companionship but also a sort of cultural familiarity that was absent in Aparna's diasporic life. As time passes, Pranab develops a relationship with Deborah, an American woman and eventually marries her. This leaves Aparna devastated as Pranab gradually becomes distant from her. According to Aparna he has completely changed as a person. She observes, "It's just hell-heaven, the difference" (Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* 68). Years later when Pranab leaves Deborah for another woman, Deborah contacts Aparna and explains her that it wasn't her who forced Pranab to maintain distance with his roots but Pranab himself became detached from his Indian circle. Initially, Aparna's daughter Usha is not able to understand her mother's emotional state but as she grows older she realises her mother's sacrifices.

Conclusion

Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories present a very nuanced picture of the marital life of diasporic couples. Lahiri neither presents marriage in a romanticized and glorified manner nor completely condemns and rejects it. Her stories reflect various aspects of marriage and highlights how different people approach their marital life in different ways.

In all these stories, Jhumpa Lahiri presents marriage neither as fully oppressive nor as completely fulfilling. In diasporic settings, marital lives of the first-generation immigrants are often characterised by adjustments and couples endure loneliness and misunderstanding while dealing with issues like cultural-conflict, language barriers and social isolation. These issues affect wives more than husbands as most of them have migrated because of their husband's career and are totally dependent on their families for their emotional and financial needs. The second-generation immigrants give more priority to companionship and emotional fulfilment and have to face issues like intergenerational conflict and identity crisis.

Lahiri's fiction depict that communication is a key feature of a successful marriage. For instance, in stories such as "A Temporary Matter", it is highlighted how lack of communication transforms grief into emotional distance. Similarly, in "Interpreter of Maladies" the lack of emotional intimacy leads to betrayal. Lahiri's fiction also reveal that cultural differences can come in the way of a married couple even if they belong to the same culture as reflected in the story "This Blessed House". Stories like "Mrs. Sen's" and "Hell-Heaven" expose the social isolation and loneliness of migrant wives. Similarly, in "Unaccustomed Earth", Lahiri examines the burden of preserving culture and language in a cross-cultural marriage.

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