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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FRACTURED MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES* AND *UNACCUSTOMED EARTH*.

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Abstract

In these stories, Jhumpa Lahiri describes the fractured marital relationships of Indians in exile and their struggle to communicate in an alien land. Marriages only between Indians are shown in *Interpreter of Maladies* whereas *Unaccustomed Earth* shows many cross cultural marriages as well. Both first and second generation emigres are present in her narratives and the themes of dissociation, isolation and displacement predominate. The burden of displacement is most visible in the women characters, especially the first generation immigrants, as they had to leave their home and family on account of marriage.

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Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction specifically describes Bengali immigrants and their daily struggle to assimilate in their acquired homeland. Both first and second generation immigrants are present in her stories depicting varied degrees of integration with the American environment. Her shorter narratives are replete with married couples and references to the breakdown of communication is a recurring trope. Interestingly, *Interpreter Of Maladies* shows marriages only between Indian Americans whereas *Unaccustomed Earth* depicts many inter cultural marriages as well.

Gender becomes significant in the immigrant experience as the first generation male immigrants travelled across continents in order to find a better life while the first generation female immigrants arrived in the adopted homeland on account of marriages. The privilege of choice with regard to their home was not presented to these young women and therefore wives like Mrs Sen are unable to cope with the new environment, constantly reminiscing about the home back in India. The little boy Eliot, who Mrs Sen babysits, begins to realize that when Mrs Sen speaks about home, it is not the University apartment in America where she resides with her husband, but her home in Calcutta. Mrs Sen cooks large quantities of Bengali food daily, faithfully chopping vegetables and fish almost as if she were feeding an army, food symbolizing her connection with her Bengali roots. The animosity with the present environment and the subconscious desire to not conform to the forced American way of life manifests itself in many ways and translates into Mrs Sen's inability to drive.

Lahiri portrays problematic marriages in both first and second generation emigres. So, although Shobha and Twinkle are confident independent American born Indians, they too have their share of relationship issues. These women are familiar with the American way of life and cherish its individuality but, are struggling, in their own way, to communicate with their environment as well as their partners. Shobha's husband Sukumar is himself a second generation immigrant, but the loss of a child and the subsequent breakdown in communication eventually leads to a final rupture in their already fragile bond. The dried up potted ivy, so close to the kitchen tap, symbolizing the death

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of their relationship. Sukumar even takes over the traditional female role as the provider of food and begins to cook the meals in an attempt to salvage their doomed marriage.

Twinkle's husband Sanjeev is unable to understand his wife's fascination for the Christian objects they find hidden in their new home. Unable to break free of his Hindu upbringing, he sees the objects as completely at odds with their own culture, cringing every time he passes the mantelpiece where Twinkle has proudly displayed the articles. Unable to reason with his new wife, Sanjeev senses his ethnic uniqueness being threatened whereas Twinkle resists this constricted cataloguing of apt behaviour. Their conflicting attitudes to the Christian objects is a reflection of their diverse levels of cultural assimilation. Sanjeev symbolises the recent emigres who are still struggling with their cultural selves, whereas Twinkle represents the next generation who are entirely at ease with their cultural hybridity. Sanjeev even wonders if he has made the right choice in marrying Twinkle and not one of the demure looking prospective brides whose photographs his mother would regularly send him.

Ruptured marital relationships are most starkly visible in 'Interpreter of Maladies', the story which shares its name with the title of the entire short story cycle. Born and brought up in America, Mr and Mrs Das both dress and talk like Americans. But something appears to be amiss as the sense of responsibility apparent in most parents appears to be missing in both of them, with both trying to pass their filial obligations on to each other. Mr and Mrs Das were both raised in America and their parents were very good friends who encouraged the liaison between their children. So, ideally a match like that should have been a successful one but, Lahiri undercuts this notion by revealing that Mrs Das was not only unhappy, but suicidal as she had allowed herself to have a fleeting affair with one of her husband's friends which had resulted in the birth of an illegitimate child. She is overwhelmed with the responsibilities attached to motherhood and the guilt of her affair begins to overtake her existence to such a great extent that she wants to throw everything away. Unable to confide in her husband, she feels extremely isolated and alone. In her desperation to share her dark secret, she finds temporary succor in unburdening herself to a complete stranger, Mr Kapasi the tour guide.

The story 'Sexy' is about infidelity and betrayal and vividly portrays the dependence of Indian wives, both economically and emotionally, on their spouses. The story has characters and situations that mirror each other. Laxmi's cousin is married to a Bengali, who is having an affair with a young British girl. Miranda too is having an affair with Dev, who is married and is Bengali. Laxmi's cousin's husband leaves his wife and son due to a chance encounter with a British woman on a transcontinental flight. The poor wife is distraught and unable to fathom how her husband of so many years can do this to her and her son. She is a typical Indian woman, brought up on traditional values and most probably had an arranged marriage. The notion of love at first sight and abandonment of family and responsibility due to that is too much for her to understand resulting in her emotional breakdown. Miranda, the narrator of the story is a young British girl who herself meets the dark and exotic Dev in a cosmetic shop and begins an affair with him. She knows he is married and still embarks on this journey, missing him terribly when he is unable to meet up due to family constraints. She realizes her folly when the young boy she is babysitting innocently calls her 'sexy' and opens her eyes regarding her own status as a mistress and as someone who is ruining a family.

The first generation women émigrés, Mrs Sen and Mala, are forced by their own marriages to immigrant Bengalis, to leave their homes and families and travel across continents to strange and unaccustomed lands. Their adjustment is twofold as they need to adapt to both, a new way of life as well as to a new person. In her usual style, Lahiri juxtaposes the experiences of these two woman characters in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Mrs Sen is extremely unhappy being in America and rejects the idea of home being anywhere else, other than Calcutta. On the other hand, Mala, the young wife of the narrator in 'The Third And final Continent' is able to gradually adjust to her new environment and with her husband's care and love, creates a happy home in the alien land. Their decision to settle down in America, even after retirement, is proof of their successful assimilation. The hyphenated status of the second generation immigrants is discernible in the depiction of Mr and Mrs Das who look like Indians but dress and behave like foreigners. They represent the confused Indians who appear to have acquired the worst from both the cultures. But, true to her inimitable style, Lahiri juxtaposes women who are unable or unwilling to survive in the alien milieu with others who not only survive, but are happy in their homes and marriages.

In *Unaccustomed Earth* Lahiri continues her exploration of human relationships presenting various marital affiliations. The first story which shares its name with the entire collection of stories 'Unaccustomed Earth' shows two sets of couples across generations. Ruma's parents represent a typical Bengali immigrant couple who had left

home and hearth for greener pastures on foreign shores. Her mother hates the suburban American life and longs for her family back in Calcutta. Ruma, the daughter is a second generation émigré and is married to an American. After her mother's death, Ruma imagines her father to be in complete disarray as being a typical Indian male, he was used to his wife doing everything for him and the house. But, she is surprised to find that her father has become extremely independent and only later finds out that this transformation is a result of an affair with a Bengali widow Mrs Bagchi. Free from the constraints of marriage, Ruma's father seems to be at ease and enjoys his twilight years in travelling to foreign countries, places he never had the time to visit.

The second story 'Hell-Heaven' describes the doomed relationship between the narrator's mother and their Bengali acquaintance Pranab Kaku. Pranab Chakraborty was a young affluent Bengali student who was studying engineering at the prestigious MIT. As a result of a chance encounter, the lonely Bengali student becomes a regular visitor to the narrator's household, sharing their food and providing the much needed company to the narrator's mother. In this story, Lahiri describes a typical arranged marriage where the husband is much older than the wife, in this case nine years. The narrator's father is a workaholic, who is deeply immersed in his research work. "He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate" (Lahiri, 65). The narrator's young mother was regarded by Pranab Kaku as an older sister, giving them the legitimacy to spend time together and even go for numerous outings in his navy-blue Volkswagen Beetle. The lonely young mother begins to unconsciously fall in love with Pranab Kaku but things change when Pranab meets an American student Deborah and gradually his visits to the narrator's household lessen. Pranab and Deborah eventually marry and begin to avoid the Bengali gatherings attended by the narrator's parents. A few weeks after Pranab Kaku's wedding, the narrator's mother tries to burn herself by dousing herself with lighter fluid, being miraculously saved by a neighbour's friendly conversation.

Both Mrs Sen and the young narrator's mother in the story 'Heaven-Hell' are displaced from their homeland on account of marriage and are faced with a sense of acute loneliness. Their husbands are busy with their careers and are unable or unwilling to spend time with their spouses. The renowned feminist writer Betty Friedan described the condition of women as trapped in domesticity where the woman sacrifices her career and herself for her husband and others and is left with nothing at the end. Irrespective of the level of education or background, the chores associated with the household and child rearing are exclusively the domain of women in patriarchal societies.

A Choice of Accommodations' deals with the strained marital relationship between a Bengali Indian Amit and his American wife Megan. Both had met at Medical School which Amit dropped out of and later became a medical journalist. Megan on the other hand completed her course and went on to become a doctor. Lahiri shows a complete reversal of roles from the traditional ones in India since Amit looks after their two daughter's daily needs, dresses them up and sends them to school while Megan is busy with her demanding schedule as a doctor. Overwhelmed with the household chores and the general chaos associated with having young children in the house, Amit begins to hate his wife Megan. Her success is a daily reminder of his own failure in pursuing the medical profession. The underlying bias of the traditional patriarchal setup where the male is the decision maker and the bread earner appears to subconsciously hold relevance for Amit even though he is married to an independent American woman. Adrienne Rich describes the terrain of patriarchy as the women's body which men try to control.

Lahiri presents a wide array of highly complex marital relationships and a galaxy of characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth*. But she does not judge her characters or their behavior. Parallel as well as contrasting situations and characters provide a rich tapestry for the reader to relish. Lahiri's narratives revolve around many marriages, both intra and inter cultural and she does not privilege any one type over the other.