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Redefining Marriages in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a second generation migrant who was born in London and raised in Rhode Island, America. Lahiri has created a fictional world of characters who have migrated from Asia to America. Her stories deal with the couples who are entrapped in a marriage but they are unhappy in their life. They can trace their roots in India and at present they are in America. The difference between the social values, culture, traditions and language between the motherland and this new country America play a complex role in their marriages. The couples belong to India and settled in America but the problems they are facing are universal i.e. the issue of congenial relation between husband and wife. They are not satisfied with their present but they are not able to find a way out of this maze of disconnectedness. In their efforts to find some harmony, some balance in their conjugal life they redefine their marriages with new terms and conditions. In this paper a study of strained relations will be done with reference to three stories – A Temporary Affair, Mrs. Sen, and This Blessed House.

Keywords: marriage, harmony, diaspora, identity and displacement

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* deals with characters that have migrated from Indian continent to America. Marriage is one of the oldest institutions in the history of mankind. The definition of marriage is:

Marriage, a legally and socially sanctioned union, usually between a man and a woman, that is regulated by laws, rules, customs, beliefs, and attitudes that



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prescribe the rights and duties of the partners and accord status to their offspring. The universality of marriage within different societies and cultures is attributed to the many basic social and personal functions for which it provides structure, such as sexual gratification and regulation, division of labour between the sexes, economic production and consumption, and satisfaction of personal needs for affection, status, and companionship. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

A marriage is an arrangement approved by society with a given set of norms and regulations. It governs the relation between a man and a woman in terms of society's norms and legal structure. In Indian tradition marriage is considered as sacrosanct bond which is inviolable. Marriage is not only a bond between a man and a woman but a relation between two families. It is an elaborate affair. A number of Ceremonies and customs are observed in a marriage. It is one of the important sanskaras in Hindu tradition of sixteen sanskaras.

Most of the characters have migrated from Indian continent and they are in a new country. They are in a new culture, new social system and new set of relations. This new culture has its norms and regulations for the institute of marriage and it is not in line with the customs of their homeland. In these stories the marriages are arranged keeping in view the traditional values and customs of India and after marriage the characters are placed in America. How the values of two different cultures shape the fate of these marriages will be discussed here. In the words of Meenakshi Mukherjee "Almost every educated Indian today is the product of the conflict and reconciliation of two cultures, although the consciousness of the tension varies from individual to individual." (Mukherjee 1)

A Temporary Matter deals with a couple living in Boston. Shukumar is still not properly settled and Shoba is working. The story opens with a notice about electricity cut daily for five days from eight p.m to nine p.m. This inconvenience is termed as a temporary affair. Apparently on the surface level it seems that they are absolutely comfortable with each other but under the apparent calm a storm is building up which will shatter their married life. Shoba was pregnant and Shukumar had to go to attend a conference. In his absence Shoba delivered a still born child. Though Shoba herself insisted that Shukumar should go but in the depth of her heart she wants him to be beside her in the moment of acute grief. Now there is a cold silence between them. Without giving a vent to their anger and indignation towards each other they continue their routine life in a formal manner. Now they are not bonded by love or warmth. They have become "experts at avoiding each other in their three bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible." (Lahiri 4). M.G. Priya has discussed the value of personal space. "A desire for personal space is another paradigm shift from the traditional Indian way to the most modern Western notion. In general, Indian brides and grooms are married from an entire family into an entire family and they never thought of their personal space." (Priya 78)



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Shoba was always a careful housekeeper. She keeps all the things in order. She will pay the bills in time, keep the pantry loaded. She was always ready for a get together or a party. She takes notes of everything. She has even noted it down when they had eaten a particular dish together. But now she is not bothered about anything. It seems “But now she treated the house as if it were a hotel.” (Lahiri 6). After she returned from hospital she walked into the house and threw books, plants, paintings and photos in the hallway. After that she cried and now there is a cold silence in their relation though they talk with each other and indulge physically but as if it is from a distance.

Shoba is meticulous in her life. Last may she threw a birthday party for Shukumar and now Shukumar is surprised that there are no candles in the house. Shoba has not planned for such an ordinary emergency. The temporary situation created by electricity cut has provided an opening in their strained relation. They don't want to see each other but in the dark somehow they are able to talk to each other. Shoba says “It's like India ... sometimes the current disappears ... I once had to attend an entire rice ceremony in the dark.” (11). This thought is full of grief as Shoba has prepared ardently for the rice ceremony of their baby. Now they are comfortable in the silences “He learned not to mind the silences.” (12).

Shoba came up with a plan to say something to each other in the dark which they have never told before. They start the game simple revelations. This temporary arrangement has opened a new beginning in their relation. After Shoba's miscarriage they have stopped attending parties, went nowhere together. Shukumar waited for the evening with curiosity what Shoba is going to tell him. They confided with each other the secrets they have kept in their hearts so long. Somehow this exchange of confessions has created a new opening. Shoba said she didn't like his poetry and she exchanged his sweater for cash. Shukumar said how he craved for women when Shoba was pregnant. They were able to talk to each other in the dark. During the fourth night they made love. Shoba wept silently and Shukumar thought about the next day. Next day the game ended as the light has been restored. Shukumar suggests continuing the game and keep the lights off but Shoba says “I want you to see my face when I tell you this.” (21). She reveals that she was looking for an apartment all these days and she is going to live without him. Shoba was a kind of person who “She was the type to prepare for surprises, good and bad.” (6). She had exemplified this quality now. Shukumar tells her the last thing that their baby was a boy. It is a shock for Shoba as she had told the doctor to not to reveal the sex of the baby. She wanted it to be a surprise. This final revelation from Shukumar is a jolt for her. When he goes to the kitchen Shoba turned the lights off again and “they wept together, for the things they now know.” (22)

The foundation of marriage, the trust is absent in them. They are trying to salvage the marriage and they are doing it perfectly before the strike of catastrophic moment. The real test of a relation is hard times, only during hard times a relation's tenacity is tested. They crumble under the



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pressure of that difficult moment. They try to manage their loveless life but were unable to do so. Outward darkness is symbol of inner darkness. In the end Shoba switches the lights on and herself switches it off. Though the electricity cut is a temporary affair but their relation is in the grip of darkness forever.

Mrs. Sen deals with the story of an Indian woman who has migrated to America after her marriage. It is a common situation in India to think on this line that the girl should be married to an N.R.I and she would be comfortably settled in life. Though Mrs. Sen is in America now but she continuously looks back towards her homeland which we can say imaginary homeland for her now. In the words of Bahareh Bahmanpour “It is as if her cooking style and her interest in buying and having fish, which have associations with her idea of homeland, are her means of asserting her ethnic identity.” (Bahmanpour 46) Her identity is lost in the material world of the west. In the story her name is not mentioned, she is known by her surname only which she has got after her marriage. Her introduction as a baby sitter is “Professor’s wife, responsible and kind. I will care for your child at my home.” (Lahiri 111). But ironically it is also mentioned that “But Mrs. Sen did not know how to drive.” (111). As if her other qualities are shadowed under the fact that she can’t drive.

Mrs. Sen introduces her husband that he is a university teacher. She mentions her husband like “Mrs. Sen had said by way of introduction, as if they were only distantly acquainted.” (112). Mrs. Sen finds it difficult to settle in American ethos. Her inability to drive a car is a symbol of failure to adjust in the new environment. She is accustomed to the way of life in India. The discussions with neighbors, celebrations informal talks – all these things are not available in America. She complained “Here in this place where Mr. Sen brought me, I cannot sometime sleep in so much silence.” (115). She is leading a loveless, mechanical life with her husband. She cleans the house, cook good meals and do everything in her Indian way. She says I must wear the powder everyday ... for the rest of the days that I am married.” (117) In the words of M.G. Priya “If for an Indian girl, marriage spells displacement and eventually a transformation, does a marriage to an NRI mean something different? Have marriages assumed a new meaning?” (Priya 75)

Two things made Mrs. Sen happy “One was the arrival of a letter from her family ... the other was fresh fish.” (Lahiri 121). She is able to give her dissent in the words of Bahareh Bahmanpour “to the threat to her ethnic identity and the culture of the Other is simply and unconscious attempt to take refuge in the past and to avoid the present through as many different means as possible.” (Bahmanpour 46) Her husband is leading a fix life – going to university, bringing fish in the evening, eating dinner with his wife, making love to her but doing everything from a distance. Mrs. Sen got upset that she won’t be able to attend the festivities of the birth of a baby girl of her sister. She says she will be able to go to India after three years. “She will be



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three years old. Her own aunt will be a stranger.” (Lahiri 122). She is upset that she is losing her relations in India and ironically, she is still a stranger in America also. She reacts, she refuses to practice driving. She didn’t take interest in cooking also. She listens to a cassette of people talking in her language. It was about the farewell she received in India.

Mr. Sen tries to pacify Mrs. Sen. He takes her and Eliot to the seaside. They had snacks there and had a stroll by the seaside. Mr. Sen asked Eliot to click their photo. Eliot waited for Mr and Mrs. Sen to move closer together but they did not. “They didn’t hold hands or put their arms around each other’s waists. Both smiled with their mouths closed, squinting into the wind.” (130). Mr. Sen asked her to drive the car. She refused to hear to the directions of Mr. Sen. She said she hated driving. Finally, she met with an accident. Her inability to drive is a symbol of her inability to adapt the way of life that her husband wants her to follow. She is unable to adjust in the new life, new culture. Mr. Sen on his part did everything to assimilate her in the new environment. But both of them are poles apart and they are unsuccessful in enthralling some love or warmth in their married life.

The Blessed House is a story of a newly wedded couple. The title itself is ironical. Neither the house nor the couple is blessed by any stretch of imagination. Sanjeev is working in a firm and he is going to be elevated to the post of vice president. Twinkle was recently abandoned by an American and Sanjeev was lonely with an excessively generous income. They met recently. Twinkle’s parents lived in California and Sanjeev’s in Calcutta, were old friends. The parents arranged a meeting for Sanjeev and Twinkle. Their marriage is arranged by their parents. Sanjeev likes to keep the house clean, keep the things in order but Twinkle is not bothered about these things. “They didn’t bother her, these scattered, unsettled matters. She seemed to be content with whatever clothes she found at the front of the closet, with whatever magazine was lying around, with whatever song was on the radio – content yet curious.” (141).

They have recently shifted to this new house. Things are still packed in the boxes. Twinkle finds Christian statues, posters and other things all over the house. She insists on keeping these things in their house but Sanjeev is staunchly against all these things. When Sanjeev tries to stop her she retorts “No, we aren’t Christian. We’re good little Hindus.” (137). But she keeps all these things against the wish of Sanjeev. She even says that previous house owners must have a plan to convert people and now Sanjeev retorts “Clearly the scheme has succeeded in your case.” (138). Sanjeev is worried about the house warming party. He is worried what his friends and colleagues would think about him when this Christian paraphernalia all over the house. Ultimately when he throws his house warming party people did ask about all these things. He had to explain “for the fortieth time that he wasn’t a Christian.” (150).



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Sanjeev was settled in his life. He was pushed by his mother to get married. His mother said “you need a wife to look after and love. Now he had one, a pretty one from a suitably high caste, who would soon have a master’s degree. What was there not to love?” (148). Soon Sanjeev realized that he and Twinkle are poles apart. Twinkle is not at all bothered by the things Sanjeev thought a wife should do. She did not take interest in the cleanliness of the house. She is not a good cook. She is not bothered about Sanjeev’s religious feelings. Sanjeev is a disciplined sort of person and Twinkle is a free bird. Now he says he was going nowhere with her. “He thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without consulting a cookbook.” (146). He did not love her though he said he did when she asked him and he assumed that she loved him too, but now he was sure about this. A heated argument comes up over the placement of a statue of Virgin Mary. Twinkle put her foot down that she will place the statue in the front lawn. Then they made a compromise that the statue will be placed in a recess at the side of the house. Sanjeev had a hell of a time during his house warming party. Twinkle took a great pride in showcasing her treasure i.e. the Christian things. Douglas one of the consultants of the firm asked “but I noticed the statue outside, and are your guys Christian? I thought you were Indian.” (151), Twinkle was appreciated by everyone for her dressing sense. They laughed at her anecdotes and observations. Twinkle finds another silver statue of Christ in the attic. She asks Sanjeev that she would like to put it on the mantle for tonight only. Though she knows he would hate it. Sanjeev actually hated it “Most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it.” (157).

In these stories the characters are trapped in a marriage not by their choice but it is an arrangement. Their marriages are not based on love, trust and warmth rather on needs and social necessity. The husbands like Shukumar, sanjeev are trying to save their marriages. There is role reversal. They are doing the house keeping apart from their jobs. Shukumar cooks the food for him and for his wife Shoba. Sanjeev is lavishly settled but he makes all the arrangements for the house warming party. Mr. Sen tries to placate Mrs. Sen by taking her for a dinner out. The wives are assertive and demanding. Shoba is leading an independent life. Her husband invariably follows her decisions. She even decides to move on to live alone without her husband. Twinkle asserts in her own way. She did not take interest in housekeeping or cooking. She even thrusts her choice on Sanjeev that she would keep all the Christian things in her house. Mrs. Sen reacts in a different way. She takes a refuge in the past memories every time she faces a difficult situation. She refuses to learn driving.

Conclusion

These couples belong to a new generation who have roots in the Indian continent and now are settled in America. The traditions and values of the mother country always loom large in their



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psyche. Homi Bhabha has discussed this in between situation of the immigrants. This situation creates for them a cultural un-translability. The husbands are expecting the old values in their wives. They want their wives should obey them, should behave according to their decisions. Sutanuka Ghosh Roy comments on this situation “In the nineteenth century men looked for greener pastures. In the twentieth century it was the Asian woman’s turn. The immigrant man needed a bride who would surround him with the familiar traditions, whose reward was the prosperity of the West and a freedom often not available to her.” (Roy 186) But the wives in these stories are independent. They want equal footing on every front with their husbands. They go to parties. In this turmoil these characters try to find some meaning in their marriages. They try to re define the age old institution called marriage. They move on with new values and modern ideas with some success and some failure.

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