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**Dual Relation: A Critique of Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Stories in dual relation as portrayed by her in her short stories – A Real Durwan, The Treatment of Bibi Haldar, The Third and Final continent, Unaccustomed Earth, Temporary Matter and Interpreter of Maladies. In her stories Lahiri provides details of Indian as well as American way of life and shows how the life partners come in conflict with two different cultures causing dual relationship. This portraiture of her characters clearly amplifies multi-cultural relationship among them. The dual relation remains intact to the last.

**Keywords:** *Duel relation, immigrant, freedom, happiness, marital life, isolation, arranged marriage, crucial moments, Eastern and Western values.*

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In her fiction, Lahiri portrays the traditional order of Indian marital life in several stories dealing with either first-generation immigrants in America or stories set in India. In male-oriented societies, as in Eastern tradition, women are responsible for cooking and doing household duties. Childbirth is considered a period during which her personal freedom diminishes.

In Lahiri's storytelling, there is a clear distinction between male and female worlds, private and public sphere, domestic and social life. Thus, A Real Durwan and The Treatment of Bibi Haldar, two stories set in India, feature docile housewives presented as stereotyped characters whose only objectives in life are marriage and motherhood; in latter story, the narrator recalls that Bibi's only dream for the future: "She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life. Like the rest of us, she wanted to serve suppers, and scold servants". For such



women, marriage becomes a necessity, the means to achieve respect, protection as well as the vehicle to fulfil a role in society. Families will do their best to find good and prosperous husbands to their daughters, as their happiness and welfare will depend on male counterpart's status and income. In *The Third and Final Continent* the anxiety of Mala's parents to provide her with a suitable match is self-explanatory: "She was twenty-seven, an age when her parents had begun to fear that she would never marry, and so they were willing to ship her only child halfway across the world in order to save her from spinsterhood".

The old tradition of marriages arranged between families also affects those first immigrants arriving in the Western world during the fifties or sixties, as many of them were either rapidly married before travelling to the United States, or committed to do so within the process of settlement in the new country. In her stories, Lahiri shows that men suffered from these imposed rules of marriage too, as they were obliged to find a wife and have children as a means to perpetuate castes and family ties. In that respect, the protagonist of *The Third and Final Continent* tells how this Eastern rule affects both the lives of young immigrants as well as his own existence: "Every now and then someone in the house, moved out, to live with a woman whom his family back in Calcutta had determined he was to wed. In 1969, when I was thirty-six years old, my own marriage was arranged". He explains that his marriage was arranged by his relatives and how little it affected turn, as he was immersed in a new job and living in America: "The marriage had been arranged by my older brother and his wife. I regarded the proposition with neither objection nor enthusiasm. It was a duty expected of me, as it was expected of every man".

Those traditional marriages, though arranged and planned, usually disregarding the feelings of the spouses, develop into strong relationships and enduring love after a life together. The dutiful protagonist of *The Third and Final Continent* admits his indifference towards his wife at the beginning of their relationship, "I waited to get used to her, to her presence at my side, at my table and in my bed, but a week later we were still strangers", just to foretell his mutual affection in the future:

"As strange as it seemed, I knew in my heart that one day her death would affect me, and stranger still, that mine would affect her". For present generations, these stories of exotic weddings in India and arranged marriages between perfect strangers display a romantic halo



which modern love stories lack. In Year's End, part of the trio stories of Unaccustomed Earth, young Kaushik reckons his parents' marriage as a romantic episode and later witnesses how they fell in love with each other after years together, probably forced by her mother's illness as well.

A similar situation occurs in Hell-Heaven, one of the stories of Unaccustomed Earth in which the marriage issue is best explored. Narrations such as "Mrs. Sen's," Lahiri focuses on the isolation faced by the narrator's mother, Aparna, an Indian-born woman married off to Shyamal Da, an Indian husband who disregards his wife's needs.

Second-generation Marriages abiding by Paternal Authority Stories of Indian Immigrants in the United States usually deal with highly qualified husbands attending American universities as opposed to wives deeply attached to Eastern traditions, devoting their time to household chores and child bearing. Those men adjusted themselves to the American way of life and their new jobs, grasping every chance to succeed in the land of opportunities.

In the three interconnected stories of Unaccustomed Earth, Hema displays a particular point of view of her own arranged marriage as the only means to achieve personal stability and a family of her own. In "Going Ashore," after years of an illicit relationship with a married man and unable to break up with him, she seeks a traditional husband with a similar upbringing as a remedy to her problems; hereafter, she decides to rely on her parents' will to find a suitable match for her.

Graduated from university and completely immersed into academic life in America, she is self-sufficient and independent but also a traditional woman who needs someone to share her life with and have children: "It was her inability, ultimately, to approach middle age without a husband, without children, with her parents living now on the other side of the world ... it was her unwillingness to abide that life indefinitely that led her to Navin".

In this collection, Hema is depicted and observed in a crucial moment in her life, admitting hidden evidence and facing an unhappy life. As with many stories lead by female characters, who either go through personal crisis or face hidden evidence, "Going Ashore" is a moment of a truth story, the concept explained by Mary Louise Pratt as follows: "Moment of truth



stories focus on a single point of crisis in the life of a central character, a crisis which provokes some basic realisation that will change the character's life forever".

This successful literary device allows the writer to include references to past and future events.

In *A Temporary Matter* and *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri reverses gender roles, especially those related to male and female experiences within marriages. In India, a strict set of rules dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly and privately, whereas in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut but are subverted altogether. In her stories of Westernised Indians, her married characters often deal with confusions of marriage roles in relation to cooking, working outside the home and bearing children. The best example of Lahiri's role reversal is *A Temporary Matter* in which Shukumar is the stay-at-home student who does the cooking and cleaning whereas his wife, Shoba, has recently thrown herself into her work as an editor. After a miscarriage, they lead separate lives, avoid each other and suffer from a complete lack of communication. As the story develops, they get closer just to share the blame for the miscarriage and to talk openly about the dissolution of their marriage. He was conscious but did nothing, she is decided: "I've looking for an apartment and I've found one' .... She needed time alone. She had money saved up for a security deposit".

Although most of Lahiri's characters obey the tradition and follow the rules of monocultural marriages, there are some independent Americanised women who totally opposed to their parents' interference in their personal relationships.

Several stories in Lahiri's fiction deal with relationships between Indian-American and Westerners. Lahiri dwells on the effects of mixed marriages in the lives of Indian-American as they bespeak the inability of spouses to accommodate two different ethnic and social background. Thus, "Hell-Heaven," the representation of a mixed relationship is explored through the comments of Aparna and her daughter and narrator, Usha. Aparna, married off to Shyamal Da, criticises Pranab Chakraborty for going out with Deborah, an American girl whose parents were professors at Boston College. Aparna's infatuation of Pranab evolve into a complexity of feelings in which adherence to tradition mingles with the fact of her having been scorned. For her that relationship is bound to founder as she believes that "in a few



weeks, the fun will be over and she'll leave him". None the less, once the relationship settles and wedding plans are made, she will stick to the idea that Deborah "will leave him" and that Pranab "is throwing his life away".

In this Indo-American world, there is a set of unwritten rules to be respected and mixed marriages undermine its stability. In this sense, the foreign element is the one to be blamed as the only feasible explanation accounting for the community member's misbehaviour.

Lahiri provides her fiction with rich descriptions and details of Indian life, cultural values and Eastern customs. While some domestic routines or rituals may be unfamiliar to Western readers, the style and themes of her writing are highly accessible and moving as they deal with general human conflicts.

Many cultures feel threatened by the temptations of American life and discourage their young people from marrying outsiders and that is precisely the case of Eastern immigrants living in the US for the last decades. They have been encouraging and supporting mono-ethnic marriages not only as a guarantee of a good match but also as a means to keep their tradition and roots in a Western context. Most of Lahiri's stories depict good Indian parents coaching their children almost from the cradle to "stick to their kind," to find or let them find, suitable matches among their group. Stories of obedient Indo-Americans fulfilling their parent's wishes abound, their upbringing together with their respect to tradition lead them to marry someone they have previously met within the community and probably through their parents' efforts either in blind or arranged dates, such as the characters in *Interpreter of Maladies* and *This Blessed House*. Both stories also prove that superficial similarities hardly guarantee happiness, as real life is quite complicated; in the latter story, Sanjeev married a girlish wife just to avoid loneliness but mainly to follow his mother's pragmatic advice: "You have enough money in the bank to raise three families," his mother reminds him when they spoke at the start of each month on the phone. "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?"

Some other stories also show arranged marriages among members of the Eastern community, this time unforced by their parents but as a decision voluntarily taken by young people,



disappointed by Western values. The American faith in personal freedom and independence, also the American dream which brought their parents from the other side of the world, did not seem to work out in terms of relationships. Marriage is a partnership, not a solitary endeavour, and the American emphasis on personal fulfillment can cause confusion in a lot of couples. Embedded in the American whirlwind of work and success, many IndoAmericans feel they have no time for themselves: they devote their whole time to study and work, while personal lives and relationships simply do not exist. At this point, they look back to their own upbringing to realise one basic fact: the traditional family unit provides not just companionship but also cooperation, compromise, respect and tolerance among its members. Those and other traditional Eastern values will make life worthy, as these are the days of permanent crisis in Western societies, not just in terms of economics but related to religion, coexistence and morals as well.

Disillusioned by the world around, many second-generation immigrants turn to old Eastern traditions and precepts to survive in a multicultural world and find personal happiness. The words of Hema in "Going Ashore" (Unaccustomed Earth) support this particular attitude to obsolete arranged marriages: "After years of uncertainty with Julian, Hema found this certainty, an attitude to love she had scorned in the past, liberating with the power to seduce her just as Julian once had".

In short, all marriages are mixed marriages, as not two people are the same, particularly a man and a woman; conventional mixed marriages come in all forms: race, status, religion, even politics. This wide variety of matrimony and personal relationships enable Lahiri to reflect on the tensions, the strength and the inadequacies and aspirations of contemporary citizens of a multicultural world.



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