

Shattered Myths: Matrimony and Malady in Jhumpa Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth

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Jhumpa Lahiri (1967 -) was born as Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri in London to Bengali parents and raised in Rhode Island. Jhumpa Lahiri did her higher education in Boston University and she was awarded with a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. Jhumpa Lahiri now lives in New York. She started her literary career with the publication of a collection of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) brought her into limelight. She received O. Henry Award for short stories, PEN/Hemingway Award for best fiction and Pulitzer Prize for fiction. *The Namesake* was later made into a film by Meera Nair. *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) is her latest collection of short stories. Jhumpa Lahiri has taken the title "Unaccustomed Earth" from the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The prologue reads:

Human nature will not flourish any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generation, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birthplaces, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth.

– Nathaniel Hawthorne "The Custom House"

The prologue itself suggests that this short story collection too deals with Jhumpa Lahiri's perpetual theme, life of the migrant Indians. The objective of this paper is to look into the portrayal marital relationships in this short story collection.

Unaccustomed Earth is divided into two parts. The first part consists of five short stories namely "Unaccustomed Earth", "Hell-Heaven", "A Choice of Accommodation", "Only Goodness", and "Nobody's Business". The second part entitled "Hema and Kaushik" consists of three interrelated short stories namely "Once in a Lifetime", "Year's End" and "Going Ashore"

The first short story "Unaccustomed Earth", from which the collection got its name, is about a Bengali family settled in Seattle. Ruma, a Bengali lawyer is married to an American, Adam. Ruma fears that she may have to shoulder the responsibility of taking care of her father as her mother died recently. However, Ruma's father has other plans. He is looking forward to marry another Bengali woman Bagchi, who lost her husband years ago.

"Hell-Heaven" is about the failed romance of a married Bengal woman, Aparna, with a family friend, Pranab Chakravarthy. The story is narrated by Aparna's daughter. "A Choice of Accommodation" narrates

two days in the life of Amit Sarkar and his American spouse Megan who is a surgeon. 'Only Goodness' records the guilty consciousness of Sudha who thinks that she has turned her younger brother alcoholic by introducing it to him in the teen age. "Nobody's Business" explores the complex relationships between Sangeeta who is called Sang, her lover Farouk and her roommate Paul. "Once in a Life time" consists of Hema's reminiscences of her childhood crush, Kaushik. "Year's End" contains Kaushik's account of his mother's tragic death and his father's remarriage. "Going Ashore" is narrates a short affair between Prema and Kaushik.

All the eight short stories revolve around the institution of marriage. Edward Westermarck, a well-known sociologist, defines marriage as "a more or less durable connection between male and female, lasting beyond the mere act of propagation" (qtd. in Bhushan and Sachdeva 331). Lowie, another social theorist defines marriage as ". . . relatively permanent bond between permissible mates" (qtd. in Bhushan and Sachdeva, 331). Lowie did not consider marriage to be durable institution like Westermarck but considered it a 'relatively permanent bond', probably because he contemplated on divorce too. The above mentioned definitions are provided by Western theorists. In Indian context, marriage is considered a sacrament and not a civil contract. This very concept of marriage as a sacrament is losing currency in the modern world. Further broken marriages seem to be the first casualty of an expatriate. This idea recurs in Unaccustomed Earth.

In "Unaccustomed Earth", first story in the collection, one can find that Ruma's father never considered his wife as a human being. When Ruma's mother expressed her wish for a world tour, he could not believe it as he considered her a cooking and childbearing machine. He had found "his wife's interest surprising" (UE, 19) She was ". . . trained all her life to serve her husband" (16) Even Ruma was blind to her sufferings. She could understand her mother only after her marriage with Adam. Ruma's father is not troubled even by the death of his wife. He wants to start a new life with another woman immediately.

Ruma's marriage is also on a storm. The crux of the problem is that Ruma does not want to accommodate her father in their home. However, she is not ready to put it straight to her father. She wants her husband Adam to do it. But Adam refuses to interfere.

In "Hell – Heaven" Aparna is ignored by her workaholic husband, Shyamal. She tries to find solace by having an affair with another Bengali immigrant Pranab who used to call her Boudi (Bengali word for elder brother's wife). The marriage between Shyamal and Aparna seemed to be alright at the superficial level, but they had many problems. The narrator says : "He [Shyamal] had married my mother to placate his parents" (65). Aparna and Shyamal had nothing in common. On the

other hand, "they [Pranab and Aparna] had in common all the things . . . a love of music, film, leftist politics, poetry [sic]" (64). Everything was going well until Pranab started dating Deborah, his American classmate. Aparna thought that, ". . . in a few week, fun will be over and she will leave him" (68). However, they were engaged and married. Aparna tried to commit suicide in distress. Later, she dropped the decision and continued to play the role of Shyamal's wife. She still expected Deborah to desert Pranab. Twenty-three years later Pranab and Deborah got divorced as Pranab had another affair with a married Bengali woman.

In "A Choice of Accommodation", we find Amit and Megan having troubled married life. Amit met Megan in the medical school. Amit quit the course to become a medical journalist. Megan completed the course. They had two children. Amit had a crush on another girl named Pam during his school days. But he did not disclose it to Megan. This caused a guilty complex in him. After Pam's marriage, he discloses the truth to Megan. He says, "It was nothing. Meg. We were friends and for a while, I had a crush on her. But nothing happened. Is that so terrible?" (125) Then the stress is removed and their marriage life becomes alright. Willingly or unwillingly, Amit was holding back this trivia from Megan.

In "Only Goodness" Sudha is wed to Roger, a Professor in England. Roger thought that Sudha had shared everything with him. However, years later, Sudha confesses to him that she is partly responsible for her brother's alcoholism. She had introduced alcohol to him. Roger did not take things easily like Megan. He said, "You lied to me. I've never lied to you, Sudha. I would never have kept something like this from you" (171). After this incident, ". . . her husband no longer trusted her" (173)

In "Nobody's Business", Sang (Sangeeta) who lives in States rejects proposals from fellow expatriates as she thinks that she found her true love in Farouk. However, her housemate Paul expresses Farouk's infidelity. Sang who was more like a wife to Farouk, leaves the country with a broken heart.

"Once in a Life Time" describes Hema's relationship with Kaushik. "Year's End" portrays Kaushik's dismay of his father's behavior. Kaushik is traumatized by his mother's painful death due to cancer but within a short time, his father remarries. This incident shatters his understanding of his parent's happy married life.

In "Going Ashore", we find Kaushik and Hema meeting each other accidentally in Italy. Hema's wedding has been already solemnized with Navin. In spite of this Kaushik and Hema have sexual intercourse. The reader expects that they would ultimately marry. However, they separate as both refuse to abandon their career. Hema weds Navin. Kaushik is killed in tsunami. Sudha is grieved by her death. Sudha continued to live

with Narain, bearing his child. She thought, "It might have been your child but this was not the case. We had been careful, and you have left nothing behind" (333).

Matrimony is the leit motif of this short story collection. All the marriages are engulfed by maladies. This is because all the marriages described in *Unaccustomed Earth* were marriages of convenience and not marriages of love. Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary of Current English defines Marriage of Convenience as, "A marriage that is made for practical, financial or political reasons and not because two people love each other".

Ruma's father married her mother so that he would get a cooking and childbearing machine. Ruma married Adam to rebel against her parents and to get away from the Indian culture, which she detests. Shyamal married Aparna to appease his parents. They lived together but never loved each other. Aparna cheated Shyamal by having an imaginary affair with Pranab. Pranab cheated Aparna by marrying Deborah. He later cheated Deborah by having an affair with another Bengali woman. Aparna continued to live with Shyamal to satisfy the society. She was a hypocrite. Amit hid his early crush with Pam to Megan. Similarly, Sudha did not say about her role in her brother's alcoholism. Amit and Sudha chose Megan and Roger respectively because the choice was good for their social life. They did not give a total picture about them to their spouses due to the fear of losing them. In the case of Sangeeta, she chose Farouk because Farouk posed to be a 'gentleman', unlike other suitors. Farouk was actually using Sangeeta as a maid. He exploited Sangeeta by convincing her that she was very important in his life. In the case of Kousik and Hema they had sexual intercourse in spite of the fact that Hema was engaged. Koushik and Hema would have made an ideal couple. However, both of them were not ready to make any compromises with their careers. Hema chose to marry Navin. This marriage was convenient to her.

Thus, we find that all the marriages portrayed in the book failed because they were not marriages of love but marriages of convenience. Similarly, through *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri has shattered two established myths. The first myth is that the interracial marriages fail due to the shortcomings on the part of the Western partner. In *Unaccustomed Earth*, we find that the Western partners were loyal but it was the Indian partners, who went astray. The second myth is that interracial marriages fail due to cultural reasons. The analysis has disproved this too. The interracial marriages did not fail due to cultural differences but they failed due to the lack of love.

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