

An analysis of marital relationship in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'Unaccustomed Earth' and 'Hell-Heaven': Its Prismatic Hues

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri is a contemporary American author with her roots in India. As in her Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), marriage and its maladies are also recurrent themes in the stories of her third book *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), especially in the eponymous tale and 'Hell- Heaven'. In these two stories she explores the relationships that exist between the husband and the wife in arranged marriage as well as in love marriage, in marriage in the same race as well as in marriage in different race. She also visits those areas of immigrant experiences that determine the nature of conjugal relationship. The couples inhabiting the world of the tales display a variety of marital relationships. Some suffer from marital discord that rises from lack of love and care, but the marriage does not end in divorce. There are others whose relationships are strained owing to the emergence of a third person between the husband and wife, often leading to break ups. There is also the marriage where the couple shares mutual love and respect. Again we have a love marriage that ends in a tragedy when the husband dies in an accident, and the wife refusing to remarry. Here is thus violation as well as adoption of the ideals of marriage as laid down in the Bible and in the Indian scriptures. This paper attempts to unveil and analyze the prismatic hues of the institution of marriage in the two well known stories, and capture the essence.

Keywords: marriage, love, discord, divorce, immigration, variety, diaspora, race

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is a contemporary Indian- American author whose works mirror the life of the Bengali immigrants in America. Apart from the theme of diasporic trauma, marriage and its problems are a major concern in Lahiri. It is partly because her Indian roots make her take up the issue with utmost seriousness (marriage being a *sanskara* or 'rite of passage' determining 'a form of disposition, impression or behavioral inclination' (*Sanskara 1*) in the Hindu way of life), partly because of the fact that it is an institution universally accepted and respected across the cultures. In 'Interpreter of Maladies' we come across a number of loveless marriages- that of Mrs Das, Mr. Kapasi and of Mrs. Sen. In *The Namesake* it is the marriage that dislocates Ashima and sends her in America to strike roots. It is the failed marriage of Gogol with Moushumi that reminds him of his father and the tradition he must respect. In the 'Unaccustomed Earth' and 'Hell- Heaven' Lahiri introduces a few couples that marriage has brought together but whose relationships pass through some critical phases. Some are estranged and some are reunited. Here is an attempt to explore the kind of relationship that exist between Ruma and Adam, Ruma's father and mother, Aparna and Shymal, Pranab and Deborah and the variety they depict.

Before analyzing the marital relationship, one should know the meaning of the word marriage. Marriage is not just a union of a male and a female human being to cater to the needs of both the individuals, it is much more. In both the Indian Hindu Culture and the Western culture, marriage has a religious association. According to the ancient Hindu scripture, Veda, life has four stages-*Bhrambacharya* or student life, *garhastha* or married life, *Vanaprastha* or life in forest as a recluse, and finally *Sanyas* or life of a monk. Marriage is thus related to the

stage of life known as *garhastha* or married state. Here a man is expected to find a female partner and maintain a family. The supreme aim of life being attainment of God through self-realization, marriage is here not considered a hindrance to it. The wife is a life mate and an aid to reach the goal. Swami Harshananda exquisitely explains the matter when he writes: 'Since marriage was considered as a *sanskara* or a sacrament, and wife as a life mate in righteous living, it was not considered as an obstacle to spiritual evolution. The *grhastha* or householder was expected to earn well by righteous means and live a happy and decent life which has to be socially useful' (*An Introduction to Hindu Culture, Ancient and Medieval*). To show the nature of relationship between the husband and wife that the Vedas endorsed, let me reproduce two 'mantras' chanted during a Hindu marriage ceremony. The first is the marriage vow by the groom:

*Om mama bratey hridayam dadhatu, mama chitta manu chitam tehantu
 Mama bachamekamana jushaswa Brihaspatistwa nijunaktu majyam*

Translated it means

Let your heart be with my mission
 May your mind and my mind be one
 May our words delight each other
 May Divinity unite the two of us (Chakraborty 136).

And the second is an address the groom makes to the bride for first time after accepting her as his loving wife:

*Om jadetat hridayam tabo tadastu hridayam mama
 Jadidam hridayam mama tadastu hridayam taba*

The English rendering of the verses will be thus:
Om! As this heart is yours, so it be mine.

As this heart is mine, so be it yours (Chakraborty 136-137).

In Christianity too marriage is considered a holy thing and is looked upon as a divine institution, not merely a human institution. It is a Design of God. When asked about the permissibility of divorce Jesus answered: "Haven't you read this scripture? 'In the beginning Creator made them male and female, and said, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife and the two shall become one. So they are no longer two, but one'. Man must not separate, then, what God has joined together" (Matthew 19). Jesus quotes from the Genesis of the Old Testament where it is explained that God created man first(Adam), then He created woman(Eve) as his helper, and that two different individuals when joined together in a marriage, cease to be different entities and become one through sexual union, and form a unit by raising a new natural family. Jesus does not allow divorce for, as he says, marriages are made in heaven and the human beings should not break what God has instituted. Andreas J. Kostenberger in his article 'The Bible's teaching on Marriage and the Family' finely elucidates the matter:

Marriage is a covenant (a sacred bond or agreement), it is entered into by the husband and wife before God as witness. Because it is ultimately God who has joined the marriage partners together, the husband and wife vow to each other abiding loyalty and fidelity "till death do us part."

Thus both the cultures look upon marriage as a sacred, mutual, close and permanent relationship. But these are the patterns of marriage, what it should be, not what it is. If the ideals of the Vedas had suffered degeneration with the course of time, the prototype marriage partners of the Bible had a fall from Heaven, for their disobedience to God. As a result marriage relationships are very often soured by want of love, neglect, infidelity, adultery, and racial hatred and the marriage thus produces multi-hued patterns of conjugality and multiple problems.

Ruma's Father and Mother- Marriage Partners in an Unfriendly Soil

'Unaccustomed Earth' is a tale that hinges around the visit of Ruma's father to her daughter's house in Seattle where Ruma lived with her husband Adam and her little son Akash. Ruma's parents were the first generation Bengali immigrants in the United States. Ruma's father married in the same race. Her mother was out and out a Bengali woman. But they left their home in Calcutta years ago to settle here. About this Lahiri clearly writes: 'Yet he knew that he, too, had turned his back on his parents, by settling in America. In the name of ambition and accomplishment, none of which mattered any more, he had forsaken them' (Lahiri 51). He lived in a rented house in Pennsylvania with his wife and two children Ruma and Romi. They brought them up and thus discharged their duties as parents.

But the conjugal relationship between them was frail. Their marriage was all duties to each other. Ruma's father had no thought of his wife. In the summer, he came from office and went to his garden and stayed there for a long time. Ruma's mother refused to take the dinner without serving her husband first. Ruma rightly feels: 'Oblivious to her mother's need in other ways, he toiled in unfriendly soil...' (Lahiri 16). On the other hand, Ruma's mother was not satisfied with the

arrangement of life her husband made in the USA: '...she had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide' (Lahiri 40). Thus neglect was on both sides.

Deep attachment or love was absent in the conjugal life of both the parents of Ruma. While thinking about her father's lonesome life now, Ruma remembers '...a statistic she'd heard, about long term spouses typically dying within two years of one another, the surviving spouse dying essentially of a broken heart'. But 'Ruma knew that her parents had never loved each other in that way' (Lahiri 33). On her father's part this want of warmth is discernable in his reaction to a wish she expressed about seeing Europe a year before her death: 'He had found his wife's interest surprising; throughout most of their marriage it has been an unquestioned fact that visiting family in Calcutta was the only thing worth boarding a plane for...he was impervious to his wife's sudden wanderlust' (Lahiri 19). Though he was economically well off and had enough time at his disposal, he felt no interest in going to trips as now. He never felt that they should have time to spare together. Even her mother did never show any urge to travel in the prime of her life. Her wanderlust emerged almost at the end of her life. So even in the vacation they did nothing to rejuvenate their conjugal life. Ruma as a married woman can feel how her mother had to undergo the strain of the relationship. With a heavy heart Ruma remembers her mother, who did so much for her, had not had a happy married life. She was no more than a burden to her own husband. Ruma sees through her father's true feelings: '... her mother's death had lightened him' (Lahiri 33).

Ruma's father's relationship with Mrs. Bagchi is a silent commentary on the conjugal relation that existed between her parents. Ruma's mother was a traditional Bengali woman and she refused to assimilate her identity with the American ways. She had a little place in the heart of her husband. After her death, her husband goes on tours in Europe. In one of such tour he meets Mrs. Bagchi, a woman of about 60 who worked as a university professor. As Bengalis they are naturally drawn together. Because of their common appearance and language people mistook them for husband and wife. Gradually their relationship took a romantic turn. Ruma's father missed her and checked his mails fine or six times a day. They agreed to share a room while travelling in Prague. He was warm in feeling towards her. Such warmth he never felt in her marriage: 'he was generous with her, attentive in a way he'd never been in his marriage' (Lahiri 9). Far from leading a life of a recluse as directed by the Indian scriptures, he goes on a tour to enjoy his freedom and makes a friendship with an Indian woman and wanted to have those joys he missed in his marriage.

After her death Ruma's mother is nowhere present in her father's life. It is suggested here in two ways. Akash continually refers to Ruma's mother as 'She died', and interestingly Ruma's father begins to love his grandson Akash and teaches him Bengali. When one night he reads out from 'Green Eggs and Ham' to Akash, Ruma feels touched by his effort and realizes that '...for the first time in his life her father had fallen in love' (Lahiri 48). Secondly, it is suggested through the letter that Ruma's father writes to Mrs Bagchi and that accidentally falls in the hand of Ruma. Ruma fails to read the letter as she does not know Bengali. She then feels ' They were sentences her mother would have absorbed in an instant,

sentences that proved, with more force than the funeral, more force than all the days since then, that her mother no longer existed' (Lahiri 59).

At the end of the story, Ruma comes to a final estimation of the relationship between her father and mother. Whatever her father might have done, he had planted some flower plants in her garden. One of them was the hydrangea, the flowers of which would be pink or blue depending of the acidity of the soil. In America they were the only flower that Ruma's mother was fond of: 'They were always your mother's favorite' (Lahiri 52). Before leaving he instructs Ruma how to tender the plants, and asks her to watch out the beetles that may destroy the plants. When the letter addressed to some Meenakshi Bagchi is in her hand, the words of her father flashes in her mind. Her mother made her presence felt in the mind of Ruma with a renewed force. She in her mind identifies her mother with her favorite flower hydrangea. She goes to her garden and looks at the hydrangea her father had planted. She interpreted her father's action to be a final homage paid to her departed mother. Lahiri finely says: 'It (the hydrangea) did not prove to Ruma that her father had loved her mother, or even that he missed her. And yet he had put it there, honored her before turning to another woman' (Lahiri 59).

Mrs. Meenakshi Bagchi and Her Husband- A Tragic Hue

In the world of Lahiri's fiction, Mrs. Bagchi is somewhat different from the set of Bengali women living in the United States. She is the Indian woman living alone, that is without a husband. In the author's word : 'She lived on Rhode Island, an anomaly, an Indian woman alone' (Lahiri 8). In 'Unaccustomed Earth' we see Mrs. Bagchi at the age of almost sixty, residing alone and teaching statistics at Stony Brook University. She goes on a tour of Europe with a tour party and strikes a friendship with Ruma's father. She has a good company in Ruma's father who is attentive to and careful of her.

But Mrs. Bagchi had a past, and her life was a long tragedy. She got married in her twenties. It was a 'Gandhgarba Vivah' or love marriage. In her girlhood, when she was in India, she loved a boy. Their love was consummated in a marriage. They were a happy couple. But after two years of their marriage, her husband was killed in a scooter accident. Knowing that her parents would try to marry her off again, she moved to America at the age of twenty-six. She was full of love and affection for her husband. She was devoted to him. His death had shocked her tremendously. So powerful was the marriage bond that she determined not to marry again. She welcomed a single life. Even at the age of sixty she carried in her wallet a picture of her husband, a clean-shaven boy in his twenties. It was out of an honor to the marriage vow. She perhaps considered it a dishonor to her beloved husband, who was dead then, to accept another man in his place. She is unlike Ruma's father who turns to another woman in a few days after his wife's death and who never loved his spouse. Hence, she lived singly and carried the title of her husband, Bagchi. Ruma's father continues to think of her as Mrs. Bagchi. It is her husband's title that gives her a social acceptability. Lahiri goes on: 'Meenakshi was her name, and though he used it now when he addressed her, in his thoughts, he continued to think of her as Mrs. Bagchi' (Lahiri 9). He preferred that her heart

belonged to another man while he wanted her as a company after his wife's death.

Ruma- Adam, the Interracial Marriage partners

Ruma, the narrator of the story 'Unaccustomed Earth' is the second generation immigrant in the USA. She was born and raised in America. She married a Euro- American boy, Adam, against her parents' will. It was a love marriage as well as an interracial one. The bride is a Bengali and the groom is an American. As the story begins we see that they have just moved to a house in Seattle, and her father comes to visit her new house. Ruma is blessed with a three year old child Akash and is expecting a second issue.

Ruma and Adam is a happy couple. In their conjugal relation there is no discord. Ruma loves her husband and Adam tries his best to make her wife happy. There is mutual love and respect. Their conjugal relationship is far better than the relationship between Ruma's father and mother, between Aparna and Shymal in 'Hell- Heaven'. Though Ruma's mother objected to the match, after their marriage was worked out, she accepted it. She prepared and brought Indian dishes for Adam whenever she visited, and Adam loved them. She loved Adam as her son. Her relationship with her parents became more harmonious after the birth of Akash. This was a great satisfaction to Ruma who was pulled between Indian roots and American ways. While her husband supplied whatever she loved of America, her mother supplied whatever she loved of India. She felt no psychological distance and was happy.

But the equation changed after the death of her mother. Her sudden death had a great trauma on her. She felt suddenly disconnected from her cultural anchor, her mother. Her diasporic experience affects the marriage relationship. Ruma complains that '...she could not explain what had happened to their marriage after her mother's death' (Lahiri 25). She felt no sympathy for Adam who was away from home on a work, and who had to work hard throughout the day. She felt a terrible sense of isolation. The presence of Adam or Akash could not diminish it: 'Though his absences contributed to her isolation, some time it was worse, not better, when Adam was home. Even with Akash to care for, part of her was beginning to prefer the solitude' (Lahiri 26). Adam also notices the want of happiness in Ruma: 'By allowing her to leave her job, splurging on a beautiful house, agreeing to have a second baby, Adam was doing everything in his power to make Ruma happy. But nothing was making her happy; recently, in the course of conversation, he'd pointed that out' (Lahiri 7). N. Nagajothi clarifies the matter with a great insight in his article *Family Bondage in Diasporic Space: Firm or Fragile* :

Ruma's life is at two different poles before and after her mother's death. Ruma was exhausted by her domestic chores with the absence of her mother and her fruitful advice. Taking care of Akash took Ruma's full concern leaving little room for socializing. She is so disinterested in everything that she avoids human ties and social relationship. Ruma's social isolation and her solitude lead to discontentment and frustration. The death of her mother rendered such a shock that had brought tremendous effect on her conjugal life. Whatever freedom and happiness Adam tries to provide Ruma, she finds herself estranged from her spouse Adam and feels the sense of void in her life.

The arrival of Ruma's father also brings a sort of uneasiness in their conjugal relation. The idea of her widower father living with them troubles them. Ruma had a responsibility towards him as he was her father, and more so now as he was old and alone. The thought of not offering him a place in her home made her feel worse. Whenever the issue was brought up by Ruma, Adam pointed out the obvious that she already had a small child to care for and another on the way, and that her father was in good health, and content to be where he was. Though Adam did not object to the idea and meant it kindly and generously, yet Ruma felt worried. Ruma knew that Adam had already done many things to provide her comfort and happiness, and his patience was wearing thin. If his father stays with them, it will certainly make a difference to him. Ruma was caught between the opposites- filial duty and husband's feelings, and Adam did not understand her dilemma. But Ruma's father refusing to live with them, it does not give any further strain in their marital relationship.

Aparna and Shyamal- Same Race Marriage Partners Poles Apart In Interest

'Hell- Heaven' is a tale of two triangular relationships. The first triangle involves the Indian couple Shyamal and Aparna, and Pranab Chakraborty, a Bengali from Calcutta, who frequents their house in Central Square, and who is referred to by the narrator Usha as Pranab Kaku. The second triangle involves the married couple Pranab and Deborah, and the unnamed Bengali married woman for whose sake Pranab got divorced. Here is the same neglect, lack of love and care leading to strained relationships between husband and wife as we find in 'Unaccustomed Earth'. However, infidelity here plays an important role behind increasing the distance between the marriage partners, their estrangement, and finally divorce. But unlike the first tale, the time frame of 'Hell- Heaven' is lengthy. It is almost thirty years. Lahiri here captures the changes the lives of her characters encounter through many years. The marital relationships here are not static but they also evolve and undergo changes.

The marriage of Aparna and Shyamal was an arranged one. They were unknown to each other, and their class also did not match. Shyamal lived in a tradition-bound family residing twenty miles away from Calcutta, and Aparna was raised in the Northern part of the city. She considered her in-laws' house a wilderness. Shyamal never married in search of a family bliss. Rather he married under compulsion. He wanted to placate his parents: 'They were willing to accept his desertion as long as he had a wife' (Lahiri 65). After marriage, they went to Berlin and from there they came to America and settled there. Aparna felt isolated and lonely in the apartment. She and Shyamal had nothing in common. Film, music, leftist politics and poetry that she loved never interested him. He talked little, gave her no company, and took little care of her. Neglecting his wife he was devoted to his research, was lost in the world of his academic pursuit. Usha makes an assessment of her father in the following words:

He was wedded to his work, his research, and he existed in a shell that neither my mother nor I could penetrate. Conversation was a chore to him...He disliked excess in everything, voiced no craving or needs apart from the frugal elements of his daily routine... My father had a survivor's mentality (Lahiri 65).

Such a man could never win the heart of a wife. Aparna accepted her fate but within she felt life an animal in the cage. Usha returned from school and found her mother 'with her purse in her lap and her trench coat on, desperate to escape the apartment where she spent the day alone' (Lahiri 63). Thus their marriage proved to be loveless and unhappy. Also Shyamal living in his closet, they could never have a social life. This enhanced the isolation of Aparna further. She reminds us of the alienation that Mrs Sen suffered at the University apartment of her husband at Boston in *Interpreter of Maladies*. But while Mrs. Sen combated her isolation by taking recourse to cooking Indian dishes for her own, babysitting and keeping up a connection with her relatives in India, Aparna did nothing of the sort. She suffered silently. But Pranab's appearance filled the void she felt in her life. At the very beginning of the story Lahiri suggests the effect he had on the couple: 'He was a fellow Bengali from Calcutta who had washed up on the barren shore of my (Usha's) parents' social life' (Lahiri 60). Pranab replaced the barrenness with happiness and joy in her mother's life. Pranab had much in common with her mother and their frequency matched.

They were from the same neighborhood in North Calcutta, their family homes within walking distance... They knew the same shops, the same bus and tram routes, the same holes-in-the-walls for the best jilabies and moghlai parathas' (Lahiri 64).

Again both of them loved to listen to the cheerful Hindi film songs of courtship. Pranab played for her mother the songs, which transformed the quiet life in their apartment and transported her mother Aparna to the rich world she had left behind to marry Shyamal. Thus he supplied the emotional need of her mother that her father failed to provide. She seemed to live for his visits. She came to love him and felt jealous when he introduced Debora. But it was no adultery on her part. She never touched him. And she knew she would never have him as her own and so wanted him to marry in her family in India.

Interestingly, Shyamal was not even slightly jealous of Pranab's frequent visits and effect they produced on Aparna's behavior and mood. He was not suspicious either. On the contrary, he felt grateful to Pranab. Usha guesses that: '...my father was grateful to Pranab Kaku for the companionship he provided, freed from the sense of responsibility he must have felt for forcing her to leave India, and relieved, perhaps, to see her happy for a change' (Lahiri 66). He seems to expiate his wrong to her wife by allowing Pranab to entertain her wife by his company. But even after many years of Pranab's marriage, when she complained to him about how much she hated life in the suburb and how lonely she felt he said nothing to appease her. Instead he would offer 'If you are so unhappy, go back to Calcutta' and thus would make it 'clear that their separation would not affect him one way or the other' (Lahiri 76).

However, towards the end, the conjugal relationship between Shyamal and Aparna begins to have changes for the better. After his marriage with the American girl Deborah, Pranab's visits became rare. His invitations stopped. He was thought of having lost his independence by his wife's influence. Time mended the broken heart of Aparna. Aparna and her husband grew older with the passage of time. The habit of living together for a long time brought them closer and made them fond of each other. Usha's absence from the house gave them space to develop their intimacy. Usha remembers:

I believe my absence from the house, once I left for college, had something to do with this, because over the years, when I visited, I noticed a warmth between my parents that had not been there before, a quiet teasing, a solidarity, a concern when one of them fell ill (Lahiri 81). Thus their fragile marital relationship evolved towards a firm tie of marriage.

The Mixed Marriage of Pranab and Deborah

The marriage of Pranab with the American girl Deborah adds another hue to the marriage relationship. It was an interracial love marriage, the groom being a Bengali and the bride being an American. Pranab married the girl against his parents' will. It was generally agreed that Deborah had engineered a change in Pranab. When their visits became infrequent, Usha's friends and parents attributed their absence to Deborah, and it was universally agreed Deborah was the enemy and Pranab was her prey. However, they were a happy couple blessed with twin girls, and they made surprise visits often. Trouble came when Pranab fell for a married Bengali woman. All attempts made by Deborah to wean him away by allowing him to mend the matter with his parents and to keep connections with his Indian friends, failed. Ultimately they got divorced after 23 years of their marriage. It was not Deborah, who was called the enemy, betrayed Pranab, it was Pranab who violated the marriage vows and deserted his wife and children. Unlike the first triangle of Usha parent's and Pranab, which ended in a reunion of the husband and wife, this triangle destroyed two families.

Conclusion

Thus marriage relations are here as varied as the number of couples. No one is identical with the other. The imperfection of man and his forced dislocation are responsible for the discord and anomaly in marriages in the stories. Lahiri seems to suggest that a good marriage is one where there is mutual love and respect, and that it should be a lifelong bond. Even if there is a problem of adjustment, it has to be overcome. It is because the alternative way may be more dangerous, for, as we see in *Hell –Heaven*, extra-marital relation drives Aparna to attempt suicide. The illegal relationship of Pranab leads to divorce with Deborah, and the two families get destroyed in the process. So Ruma's father can think of an affair after his wife's death only. So even after initial maladjustment, Aparna and her husband get reunited at the later stage. So the author makes devotion of Mrs. Bagchi a power that lets her sustain as a single woman throughout her life in foreign land. Hence, we would do better if we look upon marriage as a sacrament and as a covenant as directed by the scriptures. It is the marriage tie that holds a family, the unit of our civil arrangement, and provides emotional security to the offspring for their proper growth, and thus paves the way for a better posterity.

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