



Incompatibility Between Husband-Wife Relationship As Depicted In The Fiction Of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

Jhumpa Lahiri, in her fiction, would like to present human life in the context of human relationships. They are full of compassion and passion, thrill and charm, and reality and imagination. Her fictional writings are poignant and compassionate tales about the essence of human relationships. They are depicted in the context of a fast-changing and fast-growing society in which erosion of human values is rampant.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction, the marriage system and marital relations are an integral part of the plot and structure. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore that there is no existence of true love between husband and wife in the short stories entitled 'Temporary Matter' (Shoba and Shukumar), 'Mrs. Sen's' (Mrs. Sen and Mr. Sen), 'A Choice of Accommodation' (Amit and Megan) and in the novel 'Lowland' (Subhash and Gauri). She has presented all the two aspects of marriage in the fiction: arranged marriage (Shoba and Shukumar) and love marriage (Amit and Megan). In India the institution of marriage and family are still considered necessary. It is because of the security and social status it gives to both men and women. They find it difficult and traumatic to break away. So, the gender issues in the context of India are different from the issues in the West.

In the era of feminism, women have also become aware of taste and need. They crave equality and status in society. In a man-woman relationship, any kind of possessiveness and inequality results in chaos and anarchy in the human relationship and society as well. For the new women, Shoba and Gauri, the idea of existence entangled in relationships is not acceptable to them. They seek a reorientation of their relationship with their husbands. Jhumpa Lahiri tries to present her characters and their interpersonal relationships in a very realistic and sensitive manner.

Key-words: Incompatibility, Immigrant. Conjugal Relationship, Marriage System

Introduction

Narratives of fiction weave the desired theme around the maize of relationships among the characters in the story. As it is, relationships are central to our existence; no intimate relationship is simple or can be taken for granted. A lot of patience, compassion, and tolerance are essential qualities to build healthy relationships. Happiness or sorrow arises from these relationships. Generally, male and female characters show unusual traits that make them different from others in both their mode of thinking and behavior.

Emotional Unavailability of the Partner

The first story of Jhumpa Lahiri's collection 'Interpreter of Maladies' is 'A Temporary Matter' throws light on the disturbing early years in the conjugal life of Shoba and Shukumar. Shoba is a second-generation Indian American, and Shukumar is thirty-five year old Indian American graduate student. He remains engaged in teaching his classes and doing research. In the course of his academic pursuits, Shukumar has to go to Baltimore to attend a conference, and meanwhile, Shoba gives birth to a dead child. When he returns, he is stunned by the news of the birth of a stillborn baby. It symbolically suggests the stillness that has crept into their own relationship. Above all, the loss of a baby is always more intense and unbearable for a mother than for a father. Similarly, if a wife or a husband gets immersed in grief very much and when the needs of the husband or the wife take a back seat, frustration is likely to be there in the relationship.

Now they live in the same house as strangers and have become ``experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house.'' ¹ Emotional closeness built through healthy communication concretizes the mutual relationship. Utter lack of communication in their marital life sucks the sap of love out, making it dull and dry. Shukumar wistfully thinks of these romantic days of the past:

``He thought of how long it had been since she looked into his eyes and smiled, or whispered his name on these rare occasions they still reached for each other's bodies before sleeping.'' ²

Sexual desire is another important basic need. It finds fulfillment in marriage and more than the gratification of a physical need, it is an expression of love, contributing to the emotional and physical wellbeing of the two people involved. But the conjugal life of Shukumar and Shoba is without physical and emotional love.

He also wonders how Shoba has been keeping the house in disarray, whereas earlier she used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers tidily in the closet and pay all the bills on time. But after the trauma, she is treating the house as if it were a hotel. The birth of a dead child brings disharmony into their conjugal life. As a result, Shoba makes the decision to separate herself from Shukumar forever. The marriage bond, which is still considered holy in India, is breaking down under the pressure of raised expectations by second-generation immigrants in an alien land.

In such a troubled relationship, it is the regular power blackouts in the evening for a few days that come to their rescue. The hour of darkness brings the couple close to each other and they spend the hour sharing their secret feelings. The futility of the relationship of Shukumar and Shoba is visible to the reader as they play the game where they reveal to each other their secrets. We, the readers, learn that the element of deception is predominant and this causes the relationship to be extremely strained and leads to a point of deterioration and a point of no return.

This renewed conjugal relationship does not last long as the line is repaired ahead of schedule. Their happy married life is like a temporary matter of power cut. The marriage itself turns into a temporary matter in the case of Shukumar and Shoba who are influenced by the western culture in which the conjugal relationship depends on the whims of the couple. The insecurity and uncertainty in the relationship of the Indian couple living in America reflect exactly the unstable life in exile. 'A Temporary Matter' seems like a comment on the nature of marriages in the west. Thus, the lack of trust and love in a relationship makes the existence of that relationship futile.

The slow ending of love where the hero is sad about the past and uncertain about the future is clearly shown in this thought-provoking story where the young couple mourns the end of their love and the death of their first child. The tone of the story is desolate and gloomy. The male protagonist reflects and compares his wife's changed behavior and wishes to return to her earlier happier home and family as described in the text:

``She wasn't this way before. She used to put her coat on a hanger, her sneakers in the closet, and she paid the bills as soon as they came. But now she treats the house as if it were a hotel. The fact that the yellow chintz armchair in the living room clashed with the blue-and-maroon Turkish carpet no longer bothers her.'' ³

Lahiri shows that the couple is devastated after the death of their baby. Shoba loses her beauty after this grievous incidence in her life. She is deprived of her young looks and aging takes charge of her body. As a result, the charm in her life too gets over.

There is incompatibility between the couple and they try to avoid each other company. Shoba is very busy with her work while Shukumar neglects his Ph.D. work sleeping most of the day. We can see the multidimensional facets of the relationship between the narrator and her narrative style.

Male Domination in Society

The tragedy of an exile becomes prominent in the short story entitled 'Mrs. Sen's' in the collection 'Interpreter of Maladies'. Mrs. Sen represents a Bengali housewife who has to live in exile with her husband after marriage. Mrs. Sen is powerless as an individual. She lives in an alien culture without friends and family, struggling to cope with the new surroundings. Her husband is a professor of mathematics who is unable to understand her emotional needs and longings. Lahiri aptly describes differences between Mr. Sen and Mrs. Sen: "Mrs. Sen had said by way of introduction, as if they were only distantly acquainted."⁴

Mrs. Sen, a typical Indian housewife whose forehead marks with vermilion, reveals her effort to keep up her identity as a Hindu woman in the alien land. Her passion for fish highlights the nostalgic feeling of an exile. But her husband has no time to drive her to the market daily for buying fish and a conflict arises for this reason. In fact, she tries to drive herself to go to market for fish out of annoyance and meets with an accident. Thus, Mr. Sen is a typical product of the male dominated world. He does not view Mrs. Sen as individual with her own feelings and sentiments.

A husband-wife relationship can become satisfying only when it is liberated from conventional approaches. Marriage is a healthy partnership between male and female based on respect, understanding, consideration and involvement. Unfortunately, these qualities are absent in Mr. Sen. Like every immigrant, Mrs. Sen also feels lonely and helpless like a fish out of water at the beginning. She pines for Calcutta, but she is imprisoned as a bird in a golden cage because her husband cannot go with her to India. She cannot think of going alone. Mrs. Sen is perhaps the best example of the solitary life of an alienated immigrant living in America. Mrs. Sen's forename has not been mentioned, and her actual surname before marriage is no longer hers. Her identity crisis is expressed by the use of her adopted surname [the surname of her husband] in the title of the story. This attitude blocks healthy interaction and understanding turning their marital life slowly into a tedious and incompatible affair. Many of Jhumpa Lahiri's stories focus on the troubled relationship within the couples.

Lack of Understanding and Communication

The short story 'A Choice of Accommodations' in Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories 'Unaccustomed Earth', tells the relationship between an Indian husband and a white American [an English] wife which is somewhat strained in the beginning. Amit, the protagonist of the story is the Managing Editor of a medical journal. He lives in America along with his wife Megan and bi-racial daughters Maya and Monika. His wife, Megan is five years older than he and comes from a working family in America. Amit's relationship with his family has deteriorated due to Megan's ordinary background, plain looking and their age difference. So, he seems totally affected by alienation and isolation. Amit and Megan have been married for eight years when they come to Langford Academy for the wedding of Pam, a college friend of Amit.

Pam's wedding is to take place at Langford Academy, a boarding school where her father was headmaster and from which Amit graduated eighteen years ago. Though Amit and Megan live in the same apartment, she sleeps in his bed; her heart belongs to no one but him and the girls. Still, there are times when Amit feels alone as he had first been at Langford. Previously, Amit had a brief love affair with Pam. Megan guesses the same and is jealous of Pam. Amit conceals his sentiments for Pam from his wife. He is an alienated person who has failed to shape his love relationship into reality. He tries his best to conceal the past. After leaving that place he does not have any interest in establishing any connection:

"He had no nostalgia for the school, and when letters came seeking alumni contributions or inviting him to the succession of reunions, he threw them out without opening them. Apart from his loose connection with Pam, and a sweatshirt he still owned with the school's wrinkled name across the chest, there was nothing to remind him of those years of his life."⁵

At Langford Amit and Megan are getting ready for Pam's wedding at the hotel when Megan notices that there is a hole in her dress. The young couple decides that they will spend all night without leaving each other's side in order to hide the hole. Lahiri presents the hole in Megan's dress as a metaphor for imperfection in their relationship. During Pam's wedding one of the guests, Felicia inquires to Amit about his marriage with Megan. He tells: "We eloped eight years ago."⁶ Amit also accepts the fact that his relationship with Megan is gradually deteriorating after the birth of their second daughter. He says, "Actually, it was after the second that our marriage sort of---"disappeared."⁷

He gets impatient with Megan's expression at the party which he cannot usually see. Here one notices that Amit really loves Megan but cannot understand her true feelings. He fails to understand that their married life is still in its premature phase and therefore it still lacks stability. Lahiri has delicately portrayed the feeling of guilt in his deep relationship with his white wife Megan. Staying in a hotel or in a familiar place does not affect the couple's relationship as they have mutual understanding and relationship. The story paints a powerful picture of the interracial marriage of the two protagonists, Amit and Megan who, despite adjustments, fail to build a harmonious relationship due to their different ways of thinking.

In this story, Lahiri's focus lies in the choices one makes while marrying and in one's accommodating the partner after marriage. One should be intelligent and practical while choosing the life partner. Wrong choices or wrong methods of not so well accommodating each other prove disastrous. The title 'A Choice of Accommodations' suggests Amit's experience of exile having been estranged from his parents and spending his conjugal life in fear and nervousness.

It is noted that Amit and Megan have the tendency of changing hotel rooms while on tours. However, once on a short visit, their stay being only for two nights, they do not shift to another room. But other times they are used to frequently shifting rooms. This clearly pinpoints the adjustment problem between them. He lacks the self-confidence and elegance that Megan possesses. Megan blames him for the various problems in their lives due to his weaknesses.

Emotional Trauma: Cause of Discord

In 'The Lowland', soon after the tragic death of his brother Udayan, Subhash takes a decision to get married to Gauri to save her from the hardship of widowhood. He takes a courageous and liberal decision to marry Gauri in an emotional state of mind to give Gauri a new life. He brings her to the USA.

Subhash is a caring and dutiful husband, so he gives her complete freedom and allows her to take pleasure in independent life in the USA. It is a dream of most educated and working women to have a husband like Subhash who gives Gauri immeasurable personal space. He even suggests a name Bela for would be baby. In an orthodox Indian family, a wife is expected to have a meal after her husband finishes it. Being a modern wife Gauri does not hesitate to have dinner before Subhash. Considering her passion for learning, Subhash allows her to wander around the university campus independently.

On the other hand, however Gauri may try, she finds it difficult to connect to him as his wife. She finds herself avoiding the closeness that their relationship demands. Though after her daughter's birth, she tries to establish a physical relationship with him. But somehow, she does not feel inclined to strengthen their relationship through a child which Subhash desires to have. Very soon Subhash understands the unpredictable and unconventional nature of Gauri. In spite of the sexual relationship, he fails to establish a relationship with Gauri as husband. On the other hand, it is Subhash who shares greater affinity with child Bela. She tries to forget her past and her lover husband Udayan, but she has failed to renounce him from her life. Even though her present is far better with Subhash who is kinder and gentler. Above all, her passion for knowledge is intense. She finds herself more satisfied as she goes to the university and pursues M.A. in philosophy and later gets enrolled as a research scholar.

Having realized all these opportunities given to her by her husband, she is unable to love him. She seems tied to him because she is grateful for what he has done for her. Once she by chance finds a woman's hair elastic and a red ring flecked with gold in the glove compartment of the car, she is rather relieved, not jealous sensing there was or rather is a woman in Subhash's life. This revelation makes her satisfied in spite of the distance she maintains from her new husband. It indicates that she does not have to love him at all. This makes Gauri abandon him.

Her painful agitation gets over and it makes things easy for her. Meanwhile, Gauri gets a chance for a doctoral program in Boston, and Subhash also supports her. After a few months, Subhash comes to know about his father's illness. Gauri refuses to accompany, so he takes Bela along. Soon Subhash's father dies, and Subhash and Bela follow a longer stay there. Six weeks later when Bela and Subhash return to Rhode Island, they find the house empty. Gauri writes the reason for her abandonment:

“ I have not made this decision in haste. If anything, I have been thinking about it for too many years. You tried your best. I tried, too, but not as well.”⁸

Subhash and Bela are shocked at Gauri's decision of abandonment and her non-attachment to both of them. Finally, Subhash realizes that the marriage is a mistake and does not last as long as predicted by his mother. Through this marriage, he wants to attach his brother Udayan, but contrastingly, it becomes the cause for his psychological disturbance. Gauri's departure for California where she is hired to teach students of a college makes clear her insensitivity as a mother and a wife. She forgets everything to fulfill her wish. Subhash and Bela receive such a deep emotional injury that will never be recovered.

In this way, Subhash behaves like an ideal husband to save her from Calcutta's widowhood. On the contrary, Gauri seems opportunist, heartless and Ultra-modern wife. In almost all her fiction, the problem of marital discord is delineated, and her characters pass through crisis after crisis and some of them are in quest of a better partner searching their hearts within.

In the modern era, most marriages appear to be unions of incompatibility rather than compatibility. Generally, men opt to be rational and women to be sentimental and emotional. Their attitudes and interests are different. Naturally, this polarization results in differences between the two. Man's and woman's perspectives being different, they look at things in different ways and react to situations differently. Although the situations are the same before a man and a woman their reactions to them differ. So, in a global society of changing values, the reaction of a woman is affected by her feminine perspective. It also varies depending on the family backgrounds and surroundings. She feels the demand of adjustment to be heavy on her. This often leads to discord between man and woman.

Strained relationship between husband and wife creates a chasm between them which leads the husband and wife to their sense of loss and loneliness. This narrative throws light on the incompatibility of relationship between husband and wife belonging to the first and second generations of immigrants; whether these bonds are between Indian-born immigrants or Indian and Westerners, the situation is the same. Arranged marriages in Lahiri's stories drift through harsh times. Despite this, they survive with the passage of time, mostly due to the mutual affection displayed by both spouses. Other marriages are held to be mismatched unions. As a result, they end up in divorce.

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 traveling 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 suffer from these imposed rules of marriage too, as they are obliged to find a wife and have children as a means to perpetuate castes and family ties.

There are many reasons for incompatibility in a husband-wife relationship. It is because her characters encounter intense situations like death of mother, career after marriage, children, workaholic husband, severe illness, extramarital affairs, misunderstanding and guilt.

Conclusion

In India, the institution of marriage and family are still considered necessary. It is because of the security and social status it gives to both men and women. They find it difficult and traumatic to break away. So, the gender issues in the context of India are different from the issues in the West. The gender studies in India highlight their voice against the social injustice and oppression of woman rather than her freedom from the institution of marriage in India.

Jhumpa Lahiri beautifully portrays the psyche of the married immigrants. She minutely analyzes their thought processes so sensitively that the reader begins to equate her or him with her characters. A number of short stories of Lahiri are about conjugal life that is under great strain. In India the institution of marriage is given much importance, although in America the concept of marriage and family is losing importance day by day.

Healthy relationships encourage the psychological development of the people. But unhealthy ones diminish or destroy people and lead them to trouble. Lahiri's characters, located at the intersection of Indian and Western cultures struggle to survive in the baffling new world where the old relationship and old modes and manners are out of place.

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