Tropes of Sexuality in Select Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Sexuality is no longer a taboo subject of discussion to be spoken about in subtle tones; rather it is a significant element of postmodern writings. D.H. Lawrence was one of the major literary stalwarts who had extensively utilized 'sexuality' as a prominent leitmotif in his fictional oeuvre and encouraged an entire gamut of writers, scholars and litterateurs to probe in this subject matter, eventually breaking through social taboos and conventional moralities. This paper attempts to explore this apparently conventional concept of sexuality in the short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri and its impact on the volatile relationships and disposition of the characters. The Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, and *Unaccustomed Earth* revolve around the diasporic postcolonial lives of Indian migrants, settled in a new world. Lahiri's personal experience of being a second generation migrant leads to her intrinsic understanding of the expatriate characters and their hyphenated identities. Her characters are trapped in a mesh of traumas like identity crisis, emotional isolation and cultural hybridity. This on-going struggle manifests itself prominently in their erratic and turbulent sexual orientation. In order to dispel the sense of alienation and ambulatory existence, the Indian immigrants ascribe to sexual liberation offered by the Western society as a means to an emotional succour. This culminates in an interweaving of sexual desires and emotional wants in stories like "A Temporary Matter", "A Choice of Accommodation" and a triptych story, "Hema and Kaushik". The short story "Hell-Heaven" has parallelisms with Tagore's *The Broken Nest*, with elements of diasporic acculturation. The titular story, "Interpreter of Maladies" dismantles the hackneyed notion of India being a land of sexual suppression and unveils various promiscuous issues germinating from loneliness in an alien society and culture, which leads to grave consequences. The theory of 'sexuality' has been dissected and popularized by literary theorists and critics like Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and others. In this paper I seek to examine the lattice of sexuality in the diasporic matrix.

I

"I don't know what to make of the term 'immigrant fiction.' Writers have always tended to write about the worlds they come from." — Jhumpa Lahiri, *The New York Times*

Jhumpa Lahiri has incessantly tried to shed her identity as a diasporic writer and attempted to showcase her creative work projecting general issues of social mobility, emotional turmoil and cultural dissonance. Lahiri is an Indian American writer and has joined the luminaries of diasporic Indian English writers like V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry and others.

Born in London to Bengali parentage and raised in Rhode Island, Lahiri earned three Masters Degrees from Boston University and received a doctorate in Renaissance studies. She penned down her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* and came into prominence with its publication in 1999. She was heralded with an array of honours, like the PEN/Hemingway Award, O. Henry Award, The New Yorker's Best Debut Award and the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. Critics such as Bonnie Zare have credited her for making new and fresh contributions to American literature of South Asian origin and Judith Caesar commends Lahiri's ability "to construct images, metaphors, themes, and ideas [that] run both wild and counter to the American grain" ("American Spaces"). Lahiri tries to create a mini India with little characteristics in order to capture the essence of the place of origin of the characters. In 2003, Lahiri followed it up with her novel *The Namesake*, which was later, adapted into a motion picture by Mira Nair in 2007. Lahiri made a return with another resplendent short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), which was catalogued as No.1 on *The New York Times* bestseller list. Written in the form of lyrical realism, it begins with an epilogue from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Custom-House* communicating the over-riding theme running through the eight short stories: "Human nature will not flourish, any more than a potato, if it be planted and replanted, for too long a series of generations, in the same worn-out soil. My children have had other birth places, and, so far as their fortunes may be within my control, shall strike their roots into unaccustomed earth." Her next creative outlet was *The Lowland* (2013), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize Award, and is crafted out of the true incidents of Naxalite Movement in the 1960s that had taken place in India. Her exuberant bilingual new memoir,

In Other Words (2015) is a bit of a surreal reading of an Italian autobiography of an American author of Indian origin, relating the linguistic issues refracted through the author's life.

II

"The behavior of a human being in sexual matters is often a prototype for the whole of his other modes of reaction in life." — Freud [*Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*]

Contemporary literary and cultural theories have extensively analyzed the genesis of human sexuality, yet an open and uninhibited discussion over the issues of sexuality has been a daunting attempt. The term 'sexuality' can be interpreted as 'possession of sexual powers, or

capability of sexual feelings' in its contemporary sense, and was first registered in the English language in 1879 according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Lahiri's lucid prose beguiles the undercurrents of covert sexual desire that had sneaked into the ambivalent diasporic existence. Sexual drive in relationships either acts as an emotional adjunct or merely a pleasurable respite. With the backdrop of an alien society and culture, the sexual propensity adds an extra dimension to the characters' psyche and the inter-personal relationships. Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* proposes that sexuality cannot be traced merely by its surface manifestations, but by the subliminal desires concealed in the darkest recesses of the mind. Having cultural ramifications, the paradigms of sexuality have undergone various changes in different cultures over the passage of time. Whatever the norms might have been, sexuality has always served the dual purpose of 'pleasure' or 'procreation', that broadens the scope of the study of sexuality for when one talks of procreation, the biological status of sex inevitably gets focused, and when one talks of sex as pleasure one cannot shy away from the standard of morality that demarcates all our action and behaviour. There is a marked contrast between the first generation Indian migrants and their progeny concerning the emotional wants and sexual proclivities. The first generation immigrants have an emotional attachment to the country of their origin while the second generation has no direct kinship other than their parentage. This discrepancy gives rise to a sense of rootlessness and leads to seeking relief in the liberties offered by the Western world --- freedom of thought, speech, lifestyle, sexuality and so on. Breaking out of the straitjacketing of the Indian moral system via breaking the sexual taboos and inhibitions, differentiates physical wants from the emotional wants as well as shows the interdependence of the body and the mind. Thus, it should not be presumed that sexual liberty is used as a tool to dissipate their sense of alienation and loneliness only through sexual gratification but also acts as an emotional aid for (re)forging relationships in order to allay their emotional turmoil.

Substitution

"Actually, the substitution of the reality-principle for the pleasure-principle denotes no dethronement of the pleasure-principle, but only a safeguarding of it." — Freud [*General Psychological Theory]*

In "A Choice of Accommodations", the married couple, Amit and Megan's sexual encounter in a dorm room of his alma mater turns into an escapade owing to the possibility of getting caught mingled with a queer sense of thrill — "He couldn't remember the last time they'd done this outside their apartment, outside their bedroom, where they were always nervous that the girls would walk in. They were nervous now, but they were excited, too, knowing they could get caught" (Lahiri, *UE*: 126). After being married for eight years with two children, the spark in their relationship, which had faded away, is rekindled in this weekend sojourn where they have arrived

to attend the wedding of one of Amit's old acquaintances, Pam, the daughter of the headmaster of Langford Academy, from where Amit had graduated. When his parents had sent him away to Langford Academy, where he was suffering from homesickness, he was welcomed into Pam's house for Thanksgiving every year and had taken a fancy for her. Later in their final year when they both decided to take admission in Columbia University, he developed a strong affection for her, leading to a frivolous dalliance. In an inebriated state, Amit confesses to one of Pam's friend that after the birth of his and Megan's second child their "marriage sort of disappeared" (Lahiri, *UE*: 113) and in that stupor strays off to their hotel room and dozes off, leaving Megan alone in the party. Their sexual adventure takes place when Amit takes her to Pam's brunch the following day in order to appease her, only to find that the brunch has ended. With a series of mishaps that hampers their recreational trip, there comes a downpour leading them to take shelter in one of the empty dormitory rooms. The short vacation which was planned to be their "weekend of reckless freedom" (Lahiri, *UE*: 105) from parental responsibilities, professional duties and their humdrum routine. Lahiri employs a surprising twist in the tale, much like O. Henry. Ultimately when Amit confesses that Pam was no more than a mere infatuation, they are able to vanquish their inhibitions and make love as Megan overcomes her years' of insecurity and Amit becomes untroubled by confessing his past association with Pam. Thus, their lovemaking is at once an emotional re-bonding and an aberrant act of coitus.

The caption of the story "Sexy" upholds the crux of the matter and comes from the use of the epithet 'sexy' for the American girl, Miranda with whom Dev has an extra-marital affair. The Bengal-born expatriate character, Dev is much westernized in his lifestyle and sexual susceptibility, and takes full advantage of the time when his wife is gone to India for a vacation by indulging in an adulterous relationship. In a romantic situation in the Mapparium, Dev compliments Miranda by calling her 'sexy': "It was the first time a man had called her sexy, and when she closed her eyes she could feel his whisper drifting through her body, under her skin" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 92). However, when she is called 'sexy' a second time in an unusual situation, a revelation dawns upon her regarding her amorous love affair with a married man. When Miranda has to babysit the innocent son, Rohin, of her friend's cousin for a few hours, she is once again addressed as 'sexy' and Rohin explains that "[i]t means loving someone you don't know" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 107). Thus, the same expression has a somewhat different impact on Miranda who goes through a change of perspective — "Miranda felt Rohin's words under her skin the same way she'd felt Dev's. But instead of going hot she felt numb" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 107). The very title of the story is used as a significant leitmotif and explores the sexual dispositions of an American girl, who is much more steadfast and ethical with regard to marital relationship in contrast to the Indian man, Dev, who's highly phlegmatic and dispassionate.

In both cases, there is an attempt to substitute the lived reality for a momentary pleasure with uncertain ends. Amit, at first, seeks pleasure by trying to re-bond with his former lover, Pam but ultimately returns back to Megan because he realizes that despite their disintegrating marriage, he still loves her. Finally, he rejuvenates his waning marriage by adding a thrill, which brings him the pleasure he was seeking in the substitution. Dev, on the other hand, pursues Miranda merely as a standby to satisfy his physical desire while his wife is away and retreats back to his spouse once she returns. On the contrary, Miranda perceives her relationship with Dev as an eduring and lon-lasting affair, ultimately substituting him for her liberating foresight and exoneration from the exploitative liaison.

Confessions

"…the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have singularly become a confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relationships, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses ones crimes, one's sins one's thoughts and desires, ones illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. When it is not spontaneous or dictated by some internal imperative, the confession is wrung from a person by violence or threat…Western man has become a confessing animal." — Foucault [*The History of Sexuality]*

Lahiri manoeuvres most of her short stories with a dramatic unveiling or unexpected exposition. The eponymous story "Interpreter of Maladies" depicts the tale of sexual infidelity of the diasporic Indian character Mina Das towards her husband and her sudden revelation of this secret to the tour guide, Mr. Kapasi, who also happens to be an interpreter of maladies. Mrs. Das suffers psychological suffocation for having borne a child from an adulterous act and keeping it a secret for the past eight years. She now pleads to Mr. Kapasi — "Suggest some kind of remedy" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 65). Mr. Kapasi fails to offer a satisfying remedy for her malady and alienates her further by indiscreetly asking her "Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 66). Hence, the interpreter from whom Mrs. Das expects a curative solution disappoints her, as Mr. Kapasi is unable to comprehend her pestilence. Not being able to share the knowledge of her clandestine affair for eight years in a foreign land, she hastily reveals it to Mr. Kapasi who seems

to be a priest at the altar of her motherland, luring her to confess her sins providing a sense of redemption.

On the other hand, American-Indian immigrants, Shoba and Shukumar are going through a crisis in their conjugal life owing to the birth of their stillborn child and find it extremely difficult to communicate with each other. Due to the electrical blackout for five consecutive evenings they decide to play a game of confessions — "Somehow, without saying anything, it had turned into this. Into an exchange of confessions – the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other, and themselves" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 18). They reveal incidents deliberately to hurt each other, deriving a murky sense of pleasure from it. Lahiri underplays the subtle violence creeping into the moribund relationship as they continue sharing a meal on the same table, keep showing concern and even "making love with a desperation they had forgotten" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 19), which are mere ploys to deceive the spouse they had once loved — "A person who feels pleasure in producing pain in someone else in sexual relationship is also capable of enjoying as pleasure any pain which he may himself derive from sexual relations. A sadist is always at the same time a masochist" (Freud, *On Sexuality*: 73). These minute secrets build up the crescendo to a final stroke of confession of Shukumar knowing that their stillborn child was a boy, something that Shoba wanted to remain a surprise. This massive confession bridges the chasm of silence that had crept in their nuptial life as "[t]hey wept together, for the things they now knew" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 22), and their confessions come to serve as a cathartic relief restoring the decaying bond.

The most jolting disclosure comes towards the end of the story "Hell-Heaven" as the second generation young daughter learns after her "own heart was broken by a man" (Lahiri, *UE*: 83) that her mother, Aparna had gone to the verge of committing suicide after being heartbroken by an Americanised Indian libertine, Pranab. The matrix of relationship between Pranab, Aparna and her husband, Shyamal has an affinity to the relationship between Tagore's characters Charu, her husband, Bhupati and Amal in *The Broken Nest*. As often seen, the migrants unite due to their apparent cultural and social affinities, as Pranab is welcomed and made a part of their family as a younger brother by Shyamal. Finally, Pranab marries an American girl, Deborah and drifts away from their lives. Aparna's confession of having tried to kill herself in a state of depression and despair reveals extreme psychological trauma and a deep sense of loneliness.

Thus, the characters confess when pushed to a verge where it is no longer possible for them to withhold their deep dark secrets and it becomes an absolute necessity to share it in order to unburden themselves. While, Aparna and the married couple, Shoba and Shukumar, confess to their akin ones to communicate their secrets, forge an understanding and bond together, Mrs. Das' confession to a complete stranger can be seen as an act of catechism. Mr. Kapasi can be identified as the unknown priest and his car as the confessional box in which Mrs. Das discloses her sinful

act and seeks salvation. Thus, the initial impetus to confess might be different but the basic thrust is always to divulge and redeem oneself from the agony gnawing at their conscious.

Allegory

The tour guide, Mr. Kapasi and the Das family finally reach the Sun Temple at Konarak and glance at the inticate erotic sculptures outside since "[i]t was no longer possible to enter the temple, for it had filled with rubble years ago" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 57) signifying the relapse of Indian sexuality. India has always been a land of cultural grandiose and sexual liberation as having produced one of the most erotic literary texts in the world, *Kamasutra* written in 400 BCE by Vatsayana and characterized as "a revolutionary document for sexually liminal people, and for women" (Doniger), graphically represented around the temple — "countless friezes of entwined naked bodies, making love in various positions, women clinging to the necks of men, their knees wrapped eternally around their lovers' thighs" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 57). Yet, Indians have come to regard sex as a taboo and this closet mentality is dispelled as Mrs Das gains the courage to reveal the secret about her illegitimate child on witnessing ancient Indian sexual sculptures. Meanwhile, Mr. Kapasi observes "the topless female musicians beating on two-sided drums" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 57) and realizes that he has never seen a naked woman, not even his own wife. A stark contrast appears as Mr. Kapasi living in India is thoroughly regressive in terms of sexuality, while Mrs. Das, the second generation migrant reverts back to their ancient cultural heritage by giving in to sexual liberties. The liberal side of India displayed in the lifeless portayals opens the gates of confession for Mrs. Das while stirring the latent desires of Mr. Kapasi.

One can retrace one's perspective back to the Hindu traditional folklores for a novel insight into Miranda's sexual experience with Dev as he tries to Indianise her name to 'Mira' on their very first encounter — "Part of your name is Indian" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 87). According to Hindu mythology, Mira was a great devotee of Lord Krishna but unfortunately could not be his marital partner, just like Miranda. The rift between Dev and his fanatic lover, Miranda is due a culture clash evident from her misconception of Bengali as a religion and her trepidation on seeing the painting of Goddess Kali in one their neighbours' home when she was a young girl. Culture plays a pivotal role in the shaping of human sexuality and this gulf between Dev and Miranda creates a vast abyss leading to their severance. Yet she makes a genuine effort to bridge the gap by trying to acquaint herself with Dev's culture, even though he is devoid of any emotional attachment and treats her as a mistress. Therefore, we see the American girl is more traditional in her ideals regarding relationships than the Indian man who comes across as a philanderer, inverting the stereotypical view of the Oriental and the Occidental idiosyncrasies.

Animal Imagery

The goat and monkey are frequent animal images used as a significant motif in the "Interpreter of Maladies", associated with the two sons, Ronny and Bobby, respectively. Ronny is born out the conjugal relation of Mr. and Mrs. Das and identified with the goat which is a symbol of 'lust' that has been curbed and legitimized as 'natural sex' by the social norms of matrimony. The illegitimate child, Bobby is associated with the monkey "as image of humanity degraded by sin, and especially by lust and malice" (Chevalier). While playing with the monkeys on the hill steps at Udayagiri and Khandagiri, he turns a victim to the tricks and threats of those monkeys. "Unregulated manifestations of the unconscious occur either in the dangerous shape of the release of the uncontrolled and therefore degrading forces of the instinct, or else in the unexpected and beneficial shape of the sudden flash of light or happy inspiration …" (Chevalier). Thus, as highlighted by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, psychologists symbolize monkeys as an image of lust and obscenity as Mrs. Das outrageously reveals "Bobby was conceived in the afternoon, on a sofa littered with rubber teething toys" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 64). These subtle symbolisms are infused in Lahiri's writing for the discerning readers to detect subtle hints and involve be more actively involved in the process of reading.

Darkness

At the very beginning of the story, the power cut in "The Temporary Matter" is said to be a transitory affair both in regard to the electrical outage as well as the plight in their perishing marriage. They become cooped up in their "three-bedroom house" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 4), forcing them to consort as they had become "experts at avoiding each other" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 4). The couple discovered a hedonistic element in the atmosphere overwhelmed by darkness, as Shoba proposes to play a game of confession in order to diminish the darkness and silence, revealing small pitfalls in themselves and their relation. In due course, they enjoy the luxury of the darkness resulting in revitalizing their dormant relationship and subconscious yearning — "Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 19). This external darkness leads to an emotional illumination heralding a proximity aided by nostalgia. Darkness has always signified a strong undercurrent of latent desire for love unconditioned by ego or will, while light stands for the conscious reality. That is why even when the light comes back Shoba switches it off as they realize that the darkness has an explicatory effect upon them --- "Emotion is the chief source of all becoming-conscious. There can be no transforming of darkness into light and of apathy into movement without emotion" (Jung, *Psychological Aspects of the Mother Archetype*). This darkness also brings to light the power matrix between the husband and wife with regard to the mundane affairs like cooking, cleaning and grocery shopping, as Shoba holds a greater share of power, being the breadwinner, while Shukumar is the housekeeper. They swiftly swap roles as Shukumar, while cooking in the kitchen, silently acknowledges that it "made him

feel productive" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 8) and applies the little culinary tricks taught by Shoba, suggesting the potential domestic harmony and their quiet acceptance of each other. Therefore, the masks come off in the darkness and they slip back into their real and congenial selves.

The Elemental Forces

Unaccustomed Earth is divided in two parts — part one contains five independent stories and part two contains three interconnected stories, "Once in a Lifetime", "Year's End" and "Going Ashore" — all laced with the common theme of displacement. The Bengali idiosyncrasy of the characters keeps them rooted even as they go through a steady process of acculturation due to their transnational migration to unfamiliar geographical and cultural milieu. In the titular story, Mrs. Bagchi, the widowed Bengali lady, a representative of Lahiri's 'new woman', breaks all culture codes and invites Ruma's father to do the same. Towards the end of the story, when Ruma's widowed father pays her a visit, she comes to know about his romantic relationship with Mrs. Bagchi and accepts it, freeing herself from the orthodox norms to move on into a progressive reality. Thus, the characters remould their elemental elements with variant elements to achieve a dynamic persona which will help them keep up with the evolving modern society which has come to become a global 'melting pot'.

In "Hell-Heaven" Aparna's daughter, too, accepts that her mother was in love with another man, Pranab. Aparna also "accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American man, and then another, and then yet another, that I slept with them, and even that I lived with one though we were not married. She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn't work out she told me I would find someone better. After years of being idle, she decided, when she turned fifty, to get a degree in library science at a nearby university" (Lahiri, *UE*: 81). Thus, both the women mould themselves according to their surroundings in order to live peacefully with each other and in harmony with their selves. Hence, the elemental influences of their ethnicity must be modified in regard to their present environment to acquire a balance and inner happiness in their lives.

Lahiri signposts her symbolism in the most adept manner in the poignant trilogy, "Hema and Kaushik" overshadowing the cultural dispute and gives a peek into the human soul as the star-crossed lovers keep intersecting each other's existence in Lahiri's 'multiverse'. The fates of the two characters, much like the two halves of a holistic being separated by Zeus, are bound together by the presence of 'Mother Earth', a nurturing and cherishing element in an individual's life, represented by one's biological 'mother'. As we traverse back Hema's memory lane in "Once in a Lifetime" where she spotlights Kaushik's presence in her life beginning with the farewell party organized by her parents for his family as they were returning back to India. She recounts the time

when she resented wearing his hand-down clothes as a young girl to developing a strong infatuation as a teenager when his family returned back to America, being enamoured by his inexplicable behavior and smitten by his mother's elegance. It is Hema and Kaushik's entry into the forbidden woods behind her house where they start "unburying the buried" (Lahiri, *UE*: 249) that unveils a new saga in their life. Here Kaushik reveals his mother's terminal breast cancer whilst blurting out: "It makes me wish we weren't Hindus, so that my mother could be buried somewhere. But she's made us promise we'll scatter her ashes into the Atlantic" (Lahiri, *UE*: 249). Thus, they are knitted in a closer bond even as he moves away with his family to a distant part of the country where his mother eventually dies and Kaushik is left yearning for a locum 'mother' in this lifetime. After his bitter vignette with his stepmother and her two daughters in "Year's End", he leaves home and aimlessly drives to a beach where he evokes Hema weeping in the woods and buries the box contaning his mother's photographs in that beach. They invariably reminisce of each other's presence in connection with Kaushik lost mother and the 'Mother Earth'.

"Going Ashore" concisely captures the essence of the tale where Hema and Kaushik cross paths in Rome, preparing grounds for the final denouement. Hema is engaged to be married in two months' time to Navin and meets Kaushik at a friend's house learning about his life as a photojournalist, his anguished encounter with death and destruction documenting abysmal and gruesome human facets. They consummate their deeply buried nexus and profound passion, even though Hema was "aware that in a matter of weeks it would end" (Lahiri, *UE*: 317). Hema leaves for India where she gets married to Navin and Kaushik wanders around in a beachside in Phuket, bereft of angst and longing for Hema, the only woman linked with his past and without whom "he was lost" (Lahiri, *UE*: 326). Kaushik's presence was completely obliterated from Hema's world after being married to Navin and from the geographic world as he was drowned in the "gentle turquoise sea" (Lahiri, *UE*: 332) in the Tsunami. "The lake in the valley is the unconscious, which lies, as it were, underneath consciousness, so that it is often referred to as the 'subconscious,' usually with the pejorative connotation of an inferior consciousness. Water is the 'valley spirit,' the water dragon of Tao, whose nature resembles water- a yang in the yin, therefore, water means spirit that has become unconscious" (Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*). The vast expanse of 'water' as all-engulfing is symbolized as an amalgamation of a superior interconnected and interdependent force by Jung. Hence, Kaushik's immersion in the sea is a way of getting united with his long-lost 'mother', both the biological and the archetypal and his other half, Hema in a cosmic sphere.

Infidelity

"The great problems of life — sexuality, of course, among others — are always related to the primordial images of the collective unconscious." — Jung [*Psychological Types, or The Psychology of Individuation*]

It is often said that human beings are polygamous by nature and their sexual predispositions are similar to other creatures if they are liberated from the shackles of social conventions. The natural man (like D.H. Lawrence) believed that humans can be in a state of bliss if they give up the civilised notions of society and adhere to the age-old practices of sex. As already mentioned, the twin purpose of sex is of 'pleasure' and 'procreation', but the paradigm of the civilized society has forfeited the former for the latter, coupled with the institution of 'marriage'. The major reason behind Mrs. Das' infidelity towards her husband, Raj in "Interpreter of Maladies" was the sense of alienation not just from her homeland but also from her very own family and husband, as stated thus: "There was no one to confide in about [Raj] at the end of a difficult day, or share a passing thought or a worry" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 63). Thus, her act of adultery bought her physical pleasure as well as a thrill of indulging in the forbidden. "She made no protest when the friend touched the small of her back as she was about to make a pot of coffee, then pulled her against his crisp navy suit. He made love to her swiftly, in silence, with an expertise she had never known, without the meaningful expression and smiles Raj always insisted on afterward" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 64). It was the astonishing novelty of the experience amidst her boredom and loneliness that brings such an immense delight, breaking the monotony in her life. As Freud had stated regarding female sexuality that, "The sexual life of adult women is a 'dark continent' for psychology" (Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis)*, which has been dynamically portrayed in D.H. Lawrence's novels with an intricate pattern of man-woman relationship and Lahiri also, showcases this point of view in most of her stories.

This matrix of natural sexual craving is seen in Aparna's feeling towards Pranab in "Hell-Heaven". Shyamal's utter detachment from Aparna leads to her isolation and the sudden entry of Pranab, who lived in a nearby vicinity in India and shared common interests in film, music, politics and art, "They had in common all the things she and my father did not" (Lahiri, *UE*: 64) and infuses a vigour and effervescence in her life. As Aparna's daughter narrates, "It is clear to me now that my mother was in love with him … He bought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt … He was the one totally unanticipated pleasure in her life" (Lahiri, *UE*: 67). Ultimately her daughter "noticed a warmth between [her] parents that had not been there before, a quiet teasing, a solidarity, a concern when one feel ill" (Lahiri, *UE*: 81) after Aparna was forsaken by both, Pranab and her own daughter. This substantiates that the act of infidelity is more metaphysical than corporeal and to allege that it is committed owing to a state of seclusion and despondency in the diasporic condition would be an irrational conjecture.

When Shoba and Shukumar divulge their acts of disloyalty, it brings to light the minute details unknown about each other. Shoba reveals that she had made a lame excuse of work load at office in order to avoid having dinner with her mother-in-law when in fact she had gone out for a date with a friend, Gillian. Shukumar relates his tale saying "It was the closest he'd come to infidelity" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 19) when he had ripped out a photograph of a model from a fashion magazine and admits that she was not as beautiful as his wife. He was briefly attracted to the woman due to the temporal transformation in Shoba during her pregnancy as "her stomach suddenly immense, to the point where Shukumar no longer wanted touch her" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 18). After this brief spell of sexual temptation he felt repulsed and regretful of his deed.

The story "Sexy" unfolds the emotional, psychological and social impact of extramarital affair in man-woman relationship as it deals with the liaison of two Indian men in similar situations so that they can be treated as manifestations of the same behavioral pattern. At the backdrop of Dev and Miranda's fling, the husband of Laxmi's cousin while returning back home to Delhi from Montreal happened to have life-changing rendezvous with "[a]n English girl, half his age" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 83) and decides to abandon his wife and son to be with her in London. Both the narratives focus on the plight of the women involved — one from the perspective of a jilted housewife and the other from the perspective of an American woman treated as a mistress. Dev is enamoured of the enticing body of his blonde mistress, emphasizing on the connection between 'body' and 'sex' and the former being a stimulant of the latter. Miranda's mirage of her relationship with Dev as an emotional bond shatters hearing Rohin's definition of the complimentary term "sexy". As Milan Kundera says, "Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of woman) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman)" (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*), shows Miranda's realization of her ignominy and Dev's hypocrisy as he "entered her without a word" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 93), without her predilection.

The readers are left oscillating in a moral dilemma regarding Hema's perfidious act towards her fiancé Navin after she consummates her love with Kaushik, presented as her predestined companion. There is an eruption of their long suppressed vehemence in their lovemaking as she fondly recalls "that it was Kaushik's mother who had first paid her that compliment" (Lahiri, *UE*: 313) of being beautiful years ago. Betrayed in her previous relationship, she agrees to marry Navin, which is arranged by her parents, well aware "there was something dead about the marriage she was about to enter into" (Lahiri, *UE*: 301). When Kaushik proposes to marry her, she refuses contemplating over his complacent attitude by asking her to alter her life according to his, while Navin was relocating according to Hema's convenience. As teenagers,

Hema had adorned Kaushik's old clothes, while Kaushik had inhabited her room for a month, transferring each other's essence which after decades feels like "a new-born connection that could not be left unattended, that demanded every particle of their care" (Lahiri, *UE:* 311).

Lahiri explores the anarchic sexual condition amongst these displaced characters and their predisposition towards debauchery. Their utter frustration and seclusion finds a vent through an indulgence in sexual appeasement. Their act of infidelity is not just mere gratification of their body but also of their emotional yearnings, fulfilling the void created by their secluded existence. Jung illustrates that a harmonious physical and psychological fulfillment can be achieved with a balanced synthesis of the 'body' and the 'spirit'.

The Gaze

The concept of 'The Gaze' was first developed by the feminist film critic, Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975). Mulvey posits that the gender power asymmetry is a governing force in all forms of media and constructed for the pleasure of the male vision, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses. The phallocentric gaze is based on the concepts of voyeurism, scopophilia and narcissism, displaying woman as an erotic object, denying them human identity. The portrayal of women as a flawless spectre creates a world of fantasy which is then deemed as "natural" or "normal" over the course of time and with the exertion of power.

The third person narrative in "The Temporary Matter" traces Shukumar eyeing Shoba "looking, at thirty-three, like the type of woman she'd once claimed she would never resemble" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 1). Even after being in love and being married for years he constantly analyses her physical appearance leading him to attain a voyeuristic amusement from a picture of a model in a fashion magazine when Shoba's stomach had protruded during pregnancy. While recounting a significant incident, when he leaves her to attend a conference, he remembers Shoba "with one arm resting on the mound of her belly as if it were a perfectly natural part of her body" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 3), viewing her from a cab. This was the first time he felt delight imagining his future with Shoba and their children, feeling dwarfed in the "cavernous" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 3) cab, symbolizing the female womb, similar to the way his life was engulfed by Shoba's caring and affectionate nature.

"In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*). Mr. Kapasi eyes Mrs. Das in the "Interpreter of Maladies" through the rearview mirror of the car: "She wore a red-and-white-checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt. The blouse was decorated at chest-

level with a calico appliqué in the shape of a strawberry" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 46). Mr. Kapasi is a representative of the Indian man with repressed desires which come to the forefront while communicating with the Americanized Mrs. Das and starts fantasizing having an illicit affair, getting impetus from her use of the word "romantic" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 50), which he misconstrues in an amorous way while she meant it in an idyllic manner. Never having admired his own wife's legs, he derives a voyeuristic pleasure by scanning Mrs. Das' bare legs, much like Dev compliments Miranda's in "Sexy", saying "The first woman I've known with legs this long" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 89). Physical attraction and sexual stimulation are inevitably fused and it is the lack of these elements that leads to the dissatisfaction in a marital bond. Dev unfurls a hypocritical male acumen towards female sexuality by pretending to be a loyal spouse and at the same time, indulging in debauchery and treating Miranda as a mistress.

"Woman, then, stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" (Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema).* Dev's relegating 'gaze' forces Miranda also, to view herself as a mistress — "Miranda went to Filene's Basement to buy herself things she thought a mistress should have. She found a pair of black high heels with buckles smaller than a baby's teeth. She found a satin slip with scalloped edges and a knee-length silk robe. Instead of the pantyhose she normally wore to work, she found sheer stockings with a seam. She searched through piles and wandered through racks, pressing back hanger after hanger, until she found a cocktail dress made of a slinky silvery material that matched her eyes, with little chains for straps" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 92). Belonging to the orthodox Indian society, Dev's sexuality is imposed under traditional values and when exposed to the liberal sexuality of the West, tends to wear a garb of duplicity. Once again, Dev exemplifies the 'East' and Miranda, the 'West', leading to a magnetic attraction between the Orient and Occident, yet the cultural disparity hinders a total assimilation. Since the Orientals have always been exoticised and sexualized, Miranda's initial fascination towards Dev was also spurred by his unusual and atypical appearance as she observes, "the man was tanned, with black hair that was visible on his knuckles" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 86). This strangeness of the "other" plays a pivotal role in their physical coition, which can be equated with an animal-like carnal pleasure. Likewise, Deborah's love for Pranab in "Hell-Heaven" is also due to unusual, "othered" perception, but their marriage fails because of his promiscuous attitude. This great East-West polarity is aptly stated by Aparna, while castigating Pranab's marriage with Deborah — "It's just hell-heaven, the difference" (Lairi, *UE:* 68).

The story of Mrs. Sen is a tale of interaction between the East and the West, in a shared experience of loneliness and poignancy. The eponymous Mrs. Sen is a migrant Bengali lady married to a professor of mathematics in America, who neglects her for his work. To overcome her sense of despondency and isolation in a foreign locale she offers to babysit a child, Eliot whose mother also leaves him uncared and lonely. Even though Eliot is only eleven years of age, his insight is very keen and astute in apprehending his own mother and Mrs. Sen, who becomes his surrogate mother. Living in America and habituated in seeing his mother "in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 112), he finds her incongruous and unbecoming "in that room where all things were so carefully covered, her shaved knees and thighs too exposed" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 113). Being a young boy, his discernment is yet not stereotyped against the Orients, thus, he came to appreciate "Mrs. Sen as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor" (Lahiri, *IOM*: 114). Hence, coming in close contact with an Indian woman at an impressionable age, his perspective is unlikely to be prejudiced against the Orient as a homogenous mass who are usually eroticised and mythicised.

In the unfamiliar milieu in which Lahiri has thrust her characters, everything that they view around them is seen in a new and unusual perspective. Whether it is a gendered perception or a racist one, there is a marked distinction with individual sexual idiosyncrasy. With their intellect and emotions in an unstable condition, their outlook seems to transform and their assessment of everything is distinct and unorthodox.

Conclusion

Sexuality has become a key aspect in determining an individual's identity and manner of coming to terms with their bodies and erotic desires in the modern age. The schizophrenic identities owing to their itinerant lives, crawl out through their aberrant psycho-sexual disposition. Lahiri being a diasporic individual delves into the psycho-sexual deportment of her diasporic characters which is quite different and deviant from that of a settled person. Therefore, the splintered personas effuse their dissatisfaction and malaise via sex and grapple to carve out a singular socio-cultural and sexual niche for themselves. The socio-cultural and biological understandings of sexuality have an immense influence on the individual's mannerisms and psyche. But the uprooting of these characters from their familiar surroundings and placing them in a foreign environment would obviously lead to disturbances in their mind and result in an anomalous behavioural pattern, socially and sexually.

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