

**LOVING SOMEONE YOU
DON'T KNOW:
TRANSCULTURATION, SEX
AND MARRIAGE IN THE
FICTION OF JHUMPA LAHIRI
AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE**

SANDRA COX

Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee are both writers known for crafting female characters who navigate the complexities of gender in the U.S.-Bengali diaspora. Those female characters' abilities to succeed in their navigations are often complicated by heteroromantic relationships, like marriage and extra-marital affairs. The pressures of orientalism and female objectification render those relationships, and the social meanings assigned to them, crucial to the identity politics implicit in both authors' work.

The line from which the title of this article comes appears in Lahiri's short story "Sexy," which features close-third person narration centered on an Anglo-American woman, Miranda, who has become the mistress of a Bengali man named Dev. Because of her relationship

with one of her co-workers, Miranda is conscripted to babysit Rohin, the seven-year-old son of the friend of Miranda's aforementioned co-worker; that friend of a co-worker is filing for divorce because of her husband's infidelity. After Rohin insists that Miranda put on a cocktail dress he finds in her closet, he tells her that she is "sexy." Miranda, who is equally flattered and dismayed, asks the little boy what he thinks that word means. In response, he tells her "It means loving someone you don't know. . . . That's what my father did. He sat next to someone he didn't know—someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my mother" (*Interpreter of Maladies* 108). In this piece of dialogue, Lahiri tacitly argues that even in relationships where women have the agency to choose their lovers (as Miranda had selected Dev when she approached him at a department store) the level of intimate knowledge that lovers may have of each other cannot be easily determined, or even predicted, by the power differentials that culture, gender, national origin or ethnic identity might cause to manifest in these relationships.

In "Sexy," and in much of her other fiction, Lahiri asks her readers to consider how the diasporic conditions of these kinds of romantic attachments might demand a radical reconsideration of love, sex and marriage. Lahiri often writes about how affective bonds between men and women—love, as Rohin puts it—are distinct from familiarity—knowledge, or the lack thereof. For

many of her female characters, diaspora introduces increasingly more complex connections between desire and identity. This is also true of the characterization of women in Mukherjee's fiction. These writers destabilize the assumption that any singular set of cultural traditions may produce more stable, healthy, or satisfying attachments than any other, and thus directly counters narratives about female subjectivity inherent in cosmopolitan readings of their works.

Writings by Lahiri and Mukherjee show a wide range of effects that different heteroromantic relationships have upon the female characters, which implicitly questions some assumptions of Western feminist literary criticism. For example, Monisha Pasupathi, notes that much of the behavioral research conducted in the United States about arranged marriage labors under the assumption that choice is always empowering or that passivity is always oppressive. Rather than adopt that assumption, or the equally troubling one that cultural relativism allows readers to simply avoid the ambiguities that intersections of ethnicity, class and gender may produce in a text, Mukherjee and Lahiri produce a diverse set of characters whose stories reflect what Pasupathi's own research shows:

... the practices of arranging marriage do not necessarily lead to the oppression of women. In fact, arranged marriages are but one of many practices that require Western feminism to confront and resolve issues of cultural

variability and heterogeneity in their striving for gender equality. Without such confrontation, Western feminism will remain Western, at best ineffective in achieving its aims for benefiting women worldwide and at worst clumsily harmful. Unlike other culturally particularized rituals involving women . . . arranged marriages do not inherently require that women are injured or oppressed. (202)

Mukherjee and Lahiri craft female characters who are injured and oppressed by the choices provided to them in diasporic spaces, but each also imagines female characters who are bolstered and empowered by those same choices. What emerges from reading these texts together is an intersectional feminism that values women's abilities to adopt the cultural and marital practices that work best for the situations in which they, their partners and families find themselves.

Entry into diaspora is occasionally undertaken through heteroromantic attachment; consider the cliché of the "green card marriage" so prevalent in literary and popular culture. Some of Mukherjee's and Lahiri's characters immigrate through marriage; others test the adaptability of Bengali marital customs in increasingly Americanized contexts, and still others attempt to negotiate their own identities from within intercultural relationships. Miranda's affair with Dev, and the fetishization of Bengali culture that she derives pleasure from before identifying so strongly with Rohin's moth-

er in the denouement, is its own sort of postcolonial encounter that makes desire, sex and marriage part and parcel of the ways identity is established. “Sexy” is only one example of how Lahiri and Mukherjee challenge Western feminist assumptions about the politics of nation and coupling. For additional examples of this sort of challenge, readers can look to two collections of short stories—Mukherjee’s *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and Lahiri’s *The Interpreter of Maladies* (1999)—and two novels—Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) and Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003). In each of these pieces of fiction, the writers demonstrate how feminist theory and practice might be reimagined to better respond to the challenges of diaspora and to recognize the value of transcultural exchange.

Mukherjee and Lahiri write varied representations of heterosexual courtship and marriage between Bengali-American wives and their husbands. As each of the wives imagined by Mukherjee and Lahiri adjusts to life in the diaspora, she must cope not only with the challenges of living in a transcultural space as a hyphenated Indian-American, but also with the ethnosexual pressures that shape her identity as a woman. Amit Shankar Saha has argued that for new immigrants “the crisis of hyphenated existence—being Indian and U.S.-American at the same time—needs to be reconciled so as to define” a stable self (2). In Mukherjee’s and Lahiri’s fiction, this process of reconciliation and

identity-formation is doubly complicated by the fact that marriage may be a conduit for entrance into that hyphenated state. As an institution that requires spouses to redefine themselves as a social unit rather than as separate individuals, which also is historically unequal in both U.S.-American culture and in Bengali culture, marriage becomes a kind of fulcrum upon which gender and ethnicity are tenuously balanced.

The confluence of ethnic and gendered structures of oppression can confound attempts by Bengali-American wives to reconcile identity within a diasporic space because of competing narratives about the meanings of gender according to the host and indigenous cultures. As sociologist Joan Nagel has noted,

Ethnic boundaries are also sexual boundaries—erotic intersections where people make intimate connections across ethnic, racial or national borders. The borderlands that lie at the intersections of ethnic boundaries are ‘ethnosexual frontiers that are surveilled and supervised, patrolled and policed, regulated and restricted, but that are constantly penetrated by individuals forging links with ethnic ‘others.’(113)

The ways that boundaries between Bengali and American identities are constructed in these works of fiction can often become conflated with the ways in which sexual boundaries between men and women set up particular power structures. Because the borderlands

Nagel frames are metaphorically staged between potential romantic partners, the extent to which the diasporic space marks transgressions against that border necessarily shapes the surveillance, supervision, patrolling, policing, regulation and restriction with which each couple must cope. American contexts for understanding what it means to be a wife are occasionally at odds with Bengali expectations for the behavior of married women. A closer look at how Mukherjee and Lahiri write about Bengali-American marriage may help to identify and explain the broader criticism of national identity and institutional sexism in each writer's corpus. Reading across Lahiri's and Mukherjee's portrayals of girlfriends, brides, wives, mistresses, and widows makes it possible to draw some conclusions about how these two writers complicate reductive notions of gender parity and cultural difference by writing seemingly contradictory characterizations of women living in the Indo-American diaspora.

One example of these sorts of contradictions might be between arranged and chosen marriages. Lahiri's *The Namesake* portrays a highly successful arranged marriage, while Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* shows readers some of the challenges of a chosen marriage. A comparative analysis of these novels produces grounds for better understanding how women's choices can be limited or expanded through cultural systems that allow (or require) their parents to broker matches for

them independent of their input and/or consent. *The Namesake* tracks the courtship, marriage and subsequent immigration to the U.S. of Ashima Bhaduri and Ashoke Ganguli. Ashoke is the third suitor to whom Ashima's parents have presented her, and the first who does not reject Ashima; the couple meet only once before their wedding. In fact, Lahiri writes

It was only after the betrothal that [Ashima] learned his name. One week later the invitations were printed, and two weeks after she was adorned and adjusted by countless aunts . . . three days and eight thousand miles away in Cambridge[, Massachusetts] she has come to know him (9-10).

In this passage, Ashima is constructed as an object manipulated by her parents, and those innumerable aunts, who does not even know what she must consent to for marriage and immigration, until after that consent is irrevocably given and she finds herself alone with her new husband far from her home. Because Lahiri's diction stresses the shortness of time—three days—and the greatness of distance—eight thousand miles—Ashima's swift displacement to become a companion to a man whose name she has only just learned could lead readers (especially those who are already inclined to accept a Western feminist narrative about arranged marriage) to believe that Ashima is victimized by this system of parental arrangement.

However (in a gesture that seems to undercut that Western feminist narrative), Lahiri gives very little dialogue to Mr. Bhaduri, Ashima's father, and instead depicts Ashima's mother as central to contriving her daughter's marriage to Ashoke. Lahiri writes that Ashima is "amused by her mother's salesmanship" (7) when she overhears her lauding Ashima's skill as a cook and knitter to Ashoke's father. In spite of the fact that Mrs. Bhaduri seems to hold some sway in deciding her daughter's fate, the marriage is not in any way attributable to Ashima's own agency; in fact, readers are told that she is "nineteen, in the middle of her studies and in no rush to be a bride" when she is promised to a man she has never met (7). In the novel, there is much ambiguity about Ashima's marriage. While in these early chapters of *The Namesake* the absence of choice is troubling, those chapters are necessary exposition for the later plot points that reveal how Ashima comes to forge her own identity through the shared experience with Ashoke of being displaced through marriage. This thematic shift is particularly clear in the denouement, when Ashima, newly widowed, returns to Bengal and, once there, is honored and accepted without any pressures to give up her independence or to step into the sometimes pitiable role of a Hindu widow, which is, in large part, the result of her American identity—she is excepted from participating in a more "traditional" Bengali widowhood.

During and immediately after Ashima's wedding, the absence of even the right to refuse consent to her parents' choice marks Lahiri's representation of courtship with her husband as quite distinct from the Mukherjee's crafting of her protagonist's marriage in *The Tiger's Daughter*. In direct contrast to Ashima and Ashoke stand Tara Banerjee and David Cartwright, who occupy the narrative center of that novel. Tara, a doctoral candidate and the daughter of a wealthy industrialist in Calcutta, meets and marries David, an American and a would-be writer, while she is studying in New York. She neither informs her parents of her intent to marry him, nor does she ask their permission to do so. Unlike Mrs. Bhaduri's orchestration of Ashima's marriage to Ashoke, Mrs. Banerjee is both chagrined and angered by her daughter's decision to choose her own husband, which becomes very clear during the couple's first visit to India. Mukherjee comments upon her protagonist's fears that her father and the Hindu pantheon have renounced their previous love for her, but the narration is most concerned with the anxiety Tara feels about her mother's disapproval of her chosen match. Mukherjee writes,

Perhaps [Tara's] mother, sitting severely before God on a tiny rug no longer loved her [daughter] either. After all Tara had willfully abandoned her caste by marrying a foreigner. Perhaps her mother was offended that she, no longer a real Brahmin, was constantly in and out of this sacred room, dripping like a crow (50).

This goes beyond the boundaries of the Banerjee family and extends into Tara's identity in a national context. The use of the crow as a metaphor is apt—the black swathed carrion eaters are not only unclean, but may be a reference to the Bengali Dalit tradition in which those “untouchables” at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are also tasked with removing the bodies of the dead. The fact that Tara compares herself to a carrion bird, which itself disposes of dead animals, as she describes her feeling of intrusion in her mother's religious space, seems to present readers with the consequences of Tara's choice in specifically Bengali imagery. She has not just taken a husband. She has traded her religious and national identity for the right to make an independent choice about who that husband will be.

In addition to using this kind of imagery, Mukherjee crafts an interior monologue for Tara that clearly links her marriage to her outsider status—“In India she felt she was not married to a person but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden” (62). The fact that Tara chooses her own husband, and that she chooses from outside her caste and surname is inscribed in the text as a willful act of self-displacement. In the middle of the novel, after her marriage to David, that willfulness may be a means by which Tara more directly claims the independence that Ashima grows into in her widowhood. However, in the end of *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara must grapple with the cultural continuity that

she has lost. The refusal of an arranged marriage here becomes tantamount to a renunciation of Bengali culture and Brahmin caste; while the acceptance of an arranged one in *The Namesake* is seen as allegiance to the same, even when both kinds of marriages result in migration away from the homeland into the diaspora. The possibilities that are presented by returning to Bengal are marked in each novel in ways that reveal that distinction further. While Ashima is welcomed, explicitly accommodated in her difference; Tara is tolerated, tacitly judged for hers.

Critics have, of course, commented before on the different reactions each of these characters has to returning to India after living in the U.S. Rajib Bhaumik notes that “Tara endeavors to reconcile two diametrically opposite worlds, but like Mukherjee’s other female protagonists, she is torn between her two socio-cultural identities, between her anchoring in an alien soil and her nostalgia for India, her home country (n.pag.)” However, Jyoti Rana notes that Ashima feels no such tearing and instead integrates her feelings of belonging in India with her experiences in the U.S. by “creat[ing] a close knit web of immigrants, who share a common language and culture. It is [the Ganguli’s] enculturation and rooting in India that provides them peace in their host land. (420)” This displacement from the homeland seems less linked to the experience of living abroad than it is to the continuity of cultural practices

and interpersonal relationships, which are maintained, in part, through shared marital customs. This is not the sum total of the measures of acculturation through marriage in works by Lahiri and Mukherjee, each of whom will treat the question in her short fiction, nor is it simple to measure the degree to which the fictional accounting of marital arrangements correlate with sociological data on diasporic marriage with respect to women's rights.

In an attempt to determine the effect of arranged marriage on women's opportunities, Pasupathi considers a broad cross-section of studies of arranged marriage and women's social positions; the conclusions she draws as part of that synthetic analysis suggest that

[a]rranged marriages can be viewed as part of a system of inequities, with movement toward self-determination in marriage a route to improving other inequalities. Unfortunately, changes in marriage practices do not always result in improvements in other aspects of women's status . . . increasing freedom in choosing a marriage partner may not be accompanied by improvements in women's status overall. It might be less important to take a stand against arranged marriage and more important to take a stand against inequitable educational and career opportunities. (230-231)

By choosing to craft more complex characters whose marital situations are not as easily parsed as the assumption that greater choice will produce greater op-

portunity, both Mukherjee and Lahiri would seem to concur. Because Ashoke encourages Ashima to pursue a career as a public librarian, and because Ashima has access to a social network of other women living in the Bengali-American diaspora, her opportunities for improving her status are unconstrained by her arranged marriage. On the other hand, Tara's isolation and alienation from her family and culture seem to place barriers in the way of her ability to negotiate the hyphenated existence that Saha finds is complicated by life in the diaspora. The social acceptance of the choices of young women may be the paramount concern here, rather than the ability to make those choices independently. Both Lahiri and Mukherjee seem to support such a conclusion in their thematic treatments of marriage. The portrayals of marriage in their fiction seem to shift the kinds of questions it is necessary for feminist critics to pose about inequity in arranged marriages. Rather than focusing exclusively on bridal choice, the novels consider broader social systems that account for the liberatory potential of each character.

The Tiger's Wife and *The Namesake* explore the ways that weddings might alter national identity or gender equality for first generation Bengali-American women, but in their short fiction both writers also explore the marriage practices of second generation Bengali-Americans. In particular, Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of short fiction *The Inter-*

preter of Maladies, in which “Sexy” is also published, presents readers with several permutations of arranged and chosen marriages in the diaspora. The first story in the collection, “A Temporary Matter,” follows two second-generation Bengali-Americans, Shukumar and his wife Shoba, through the dissolution of their marriage after the stillbirth of a child. The couple is depicted as unhappy, perhaps owing to their different methods of grieving after their shared loss, or perhaps because they were simply not well-matched. The ambiguity about these two causes is not easily resolved with the textual evidence Lahiri provides, which in and of itself suggests that she may well intend that subtextual ambivalence about causation.

Shukumar and Shoba come together under circumstances that might only be described as transcultural. They date before becoming engaged; Shukumar even recounts their first interaction, wherein he forget to tip the waiter because he was distracted by the “funny feeling [he] might marry [her]” (52). The two were introduced by “a group of Bengali poets giving a recital” who, upon the urging of Shukumar and Shoba’s families, had arranged for the couple to be seated “side-by-side on folding wooden chairs” (24). The way that Lahiri has other Bengalis, all of whom are also living in the diaspora, collaborate on the arrangement with the couples’ parents is evidence of a transcultural courtship tradition that is neither wholly Bengali nor typically

American. The match is not arranged by two fathers in negotiation, conferring only with their wives and their sons but not their daughters; nor is it a romantic and impetuous choice made without any consultation with parents or community. Shoba and Shukumar's marriage seems to be set-up and self-selected in equal parts. This transcultural mix of parental choice and bridal choice makes drawing conclusions about the effect of that system on the success or failure of that marriage doubly difficult. By refusing to correlate the divorce with either system of marriage, Lahiri gestures towards a more complex view of how Shoba's identity as a second-generation Bengali-American woman is only one part of the explanation. The rest of that explanation may well be linked to the fact that she is organized and controlled, while Shukumar is messy and emotional, or that she has a stable salaried job while Shukumar is making little progress on the dissertation he is writing while she is at work, or that both their parents seem to be too far off to support them during their time of grief. In crafting these myriad reasons that the couple are unsuccessful at reconciling, Lahiri seems to communicate a profound ambiguity about using cultural traditions of courtship as a deterministic measure of the happiness and healthiness of a marriage or the authenticity and continuity of an ethnic identity.

A similar ambivalence is also to be found later in the collection, where readers will encounter the story

“This Blessed House” and be introduced to another second generation Bengali-American couple, Twinkle and her husband Sanjeev, who yield to “the urging of their matchmakers” (112), friends of both their parents who had “arranged the occasion at which Twinkle and Sanjeev were introduced” (113) four months ago. In the narrative present they are moving into their first home together as newlyweds. At first Sanjeev is dismayed that Twinkle is not more domestic. He comes home from work to find her reading magazines in bed or chatting on the phone to her friends in California, when he notes that there are boxes that want unpacking, an attic to sweep, paint to retouch, all of which he hopes she will undertake. Later, he comes to find her gregarious nature and odd passions—for drinking too much whiskey, dancing the tango in front of strangers, and wowing his co-workers with her effervescence and charm—distinctly more valuable than the qualities he had hoped to find in a traditional Bengali bride. His early disappointment is presented as an antecedent to his pleasure at their more equitable arrangement, which is also difficult to establish as causally related to the circumstances of their marriage.

In these two stories, Lahiri complicates the doubled dichotomies of diasporic marriage (either arranged or chosen, either happy or unhappy) by demonstrating that shared national origin is not always enough to draw a husband and wife close to one another. In

fact, by disrupting the expected parity of gender roles in both couples (Shukumar does all the cooking while Shoba works full time and Twinkle refuses to be made responsible for the keeping of the house), Lahiri seems to be suggesting that individual differences are of more account than categorical definitions of culture and gender that can, perhaps, be predicted using data about courtship rituals. This too seems to align with the research on transcultural and romantic coupling in the social sciences; Pasupathi also notes that the studies she looks at reveal a closer correlation between women's opportunities and class than women's opportunities and arranged or chosen marriages. What Lahiri and Mukherjee may be presenting, then, is a deliberative call to disrupt the expectation that systems stressing women's marital choices necessarily provide women with the most opportunity.

Both writers craft narratives about women of Bengali descent living in the U.S. for whom a traditional marriage of either cultural variety—chosen or arranged—is not an acceptable alternative. In *The Namesake*, Ashima's son Gogol marries Moushumi, a Bengali-American woman with whom he had a short lived antipathy in childhood. Their first date after their reintroduction as adults is arranged by their mothers in the same transcultural mix of Bengali matchmaking and American dating that can be seen in "A Temporary Matter" and "This Blessed House." However, unlike the universally

troubling issue of infant mortality that divides Shoba from Shukumar or the happy abandonment of expectations that brings Sanjeev comfort with Twinkle, the failure of this marriage does seem to have its roots in the acculturated differences between first and second generation Bengali women. Several chapters before her marriage to Gogol dissolves because of Moushumi's infidelity, Lahiri's narrator reveals the starkness of that difference by noting that Moushumi pities her mother's dependence and values her own "capability of being on her own" (247):

Along with the Sanskrit marriage vows [Moushumi] repeated at her wedding she'd privately vowed she'd never grow fully dependent on her husband, as her mother has. For even after thirty-two years abroad, in England and now America, her mother does not know how to drive, does not have a job, does not know the difference between a checking and a savings account. And yet she is a perfectly intelligent woman, was an honors student in philology at Presidency College before she was married off at twenty-two. (247)

For Moushumi, the only way to escape this maternal script is to try marriage her mother's way, and thus prove it to be fully unworkable for her. Even at the moment of her vows to Gogol she seems to be looking for ways to undermine that commitment. For instance, she applies for a postdoctoral fellowship in Paris just before their wedding and, when she receives the ac-

ceptance letter, declines the fellowship and resents Gogol without ever discussing it with him. This choice, as well as a dozen other small and unspoken resentments, allow Moushumi to sabotage the relationship in order to prove to herself and to her mother that a shared culture of origin is not the stuff that a life together must be made of. In this instance, Lahiri seems to craft another mix of arranged and chosen. Although Gogol's and Moushumi's mothers are pleased by the arrangement and have set up the initial date (an act that may be the source of Moushumi's inevitable rejection of the match), the fact remains that their courtship is never negotiated by any of their parents until after they are engaged, and the relationship is one they clearly chose together. In spite of that free and equal choice, this marriage is far less successful than those in *Interpreter of Maladies*. Moushumi is displeased by the same conditions that produce happiness for Twinkle and discord for Shoba. One of the key insights that may be offered by considering these narratives together is that ways in which spouse are selected may have little to do with the success of a relationship. What does seem to be an important predictor of marital harmony, is the extent to which the female characters are able to integrate their ethnic identities with their genders in both of the cultural systems they must inhabit because of the pressures of a diasporic identity. Twinkle and Ashima have community and self-knowledge and a means of deriving esteem outside their husbands; it

may be argued that the rage the Banerjees feel toward Tara and the self-isolation that is the subtext of Moushumi's rejection of Gogol are symptoms of an extended disjuncting of cultural identity with these character's experiences as explicitly gendered subjects.

The character who may provide the best evidence for the claim in these works of fiction is the titular protagonist written about by Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine*. Jasmine is a character who is crafted as an alternative to both sets of culturally produced courtship norms. Mukherjee writes about a woman who has a series of monogamous relationships that each are a sort of stepping stone in a transcultural transformation; every time the protagonist takes a new lover, she also takes a new name. The titular character, born Jyoti in Hasnapur-na, a small village in East Bengal, has three particularly important couplings. The first is a traditional arranged marriage to a man named Prakash who renames her Jasmine. After his death she immigrates, without documents, to the United States where she becomes the live-in nanny to an American girl named Duff, and the lover to Duff's married father, Taylor, who renames her Jase. When that relationship sours, Jase moves to Iowa and begins living with Bud, an older man who runs the bank she works in, and she is again renamed by her lover, who calls her Jane. Much has been made of this repeated renaming in the published criticism on the novel. For example, Erin Khue Ninh argues that

the novel is an allegory of *Vanity Fair*, with Thackeray's consideration of social climbing reimagined as an exercise in border crossing:

Jasmine's path in the United States [is] a linear trajectory from foreigner to American, from border to heartland, and on toward multiculturalism. [. . . H]owever, it seems impossible to ignore the novel's less teleological scripts concerning the roles into which the heroine is cast: undocumented transnational migrant worker, domestic servant, caretaker, sex worker, and mail-order bride. Considering that she arguably navigates not one but all of these key positions of the third-world woman in her sequence of employment and relationships in the United States, Jasmine's resumé suggests less her successful assimilation than her perpetual liminality. In her, the novel prefigures the current discourse around global migration, labor, and family for the Asian female foreign body (146).

Alternatively, K. S. Dhivya and K. Ravindran argue that the process of adopting several names is a way of manifesting a kind of self-actualization; they write "in *Jasmine* the life of Jyothi is glorified by herself and her inner consciousness[,] which makes her act according to her own wish. Mukherjee's novel reaches the theme of fulfillment within the inner self at the final moment" (65). Whether because of her own ability to exercise choice or because of the diasporic pressures to assimilate, it is clear that the hypersexualization of the character's body shapes each of these depictions

of Bengali-American women's marital behavior as important to the narrative about women's liberation through transculturation. Mukherjee's depictions of her protagonist in what is, perhaps, her most widely-read and certainly most critically-discussed novel, are profoundly ambivalent about the nature of female subjectivity in a transnational context. Because it is so different from Lahiri's ambivalence in the two stories from *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jasmine's resistance to the dominant script of marital behavior is perhaps less facile than Moushumi's. For Ninh, the novel *Jasmine* has radically destabilizing potential because it reveals the ways in which "first-world patriarchy" has been bolstered by global capitalism; Jasmine is a character who embodies "the importation of foreign reproductive labor" as the direct result of the empowerment of American women. Ninh supports this argument by suggesting that Jasmine's perpetual liminality is an economic necessity because "Western women may no longer be purchased at the same depressed rates" as immigrants may be (157). When read in tandem with the rest of Lahiri and Mukherjee's work on this topic, however, the conflation of marriage, sexual exploitation, and domestic labor is more difficult to square with notions of self-actualization through choice. It is undeniably true that Jasmine comes to accept that her identity must be shaped in response to the needs and expectations of her male partners, which seems to produce a set of conditions under which self-actualiza-

tion is impossible. Rather than crafting a set of copies of Jasmine that reaffirm this impossibility as a structurally extendable truth, Lahiri's and Mukherjee's later fiction complicates the narrative Ninh constructs by providing textual evidence of female subjectivity that emerges from marital relationships with men. That subjectivity is contingent upon those relationships being reconfigured by women through the negotiation of the tensions between ethnic and gendered identity. For instance, Ashima is able to successfully self-actualize from within an arranged marriage because Ashoke does not prevent her from using the diasporic space to open up a negotiation about the roles of husband and wife in Bengali and American culture. The facts that he helps raise their children—Gogol and Sonia—and that she is well-educated and works outside the home in a job that is intellectually fulfilling show that these kinds of negotiations can be successful for some women. That may then suggest that Ashima's daughter-in-law's inability to reconcile her complex feelings about her cultural origins limit her ability to see her own marriage to Ashima's son as similarly flexible.

The notion that a transcultural understanding of heterosexual relationships may be of particular use to women is perhaps hardest to pin down in the works by Mukherjee and Lahiri that treat pairings of Bengali-American men and non-Bengali American women or, conversely of Bengali-American women with

non-Bengali-American men. Much of Mukherjee's fiction is inspired by her own experiences as the Bengali wife of an American man, the poet Clark Blaise, with whom she immigrated to Canada, then Iowa and finally California; most notably the two wrote a text together called *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and from which most of the content of *The Tiger's Daughter* is fictionalized. Lahiri has been quite private about her marriage to Alberto Vourvoulias-Bush, who is not Bengali, but her writing includes many characters in transcultural relationships—for instance, Gogol has two long term girlfriends—Ruth and Maxine, both Anglo-American—before marrying Moushumi.

Lahiri and Mukherjee have crafted fiction that is populated by cosmopolitan characters who defy the typically binary understandings of globalization implicit in many postcolonial theoretical models. In doing so, their representations of Bengali-American women often seem to bridge a gap between cosmopolitanist assumptions (that Western cultural traditions are inherently more developed and therefore more egalitarian than non-Western cultural traditions) and transculturalist edicts (which suggest that a synthesis of cultural traditions is not only beneficial but inevitable). On the one hand the term “cosmopolitan” seems to indicate that cultural difference is homogenized by acculturation, that immigrants are “Americanized” and lose their culture due to pressures within diasporic con-

texts. Timothy Brennan has even argued that cosmopolitanism is the “way in which American patriotism is today being expressed” (682). On the other hand, cosmopolitan perspectives might be understood to maintain rather than resolve tensions between cultural differences that force individuals and their increasingly global communities to reject the limitations of nation as a means of determining identity, thereby undermining nationalism conceptually as well as practically. As Elizabeth Jackson has noted, “[i]t is possible to have a culturally open disposition and to imagine the world as one community while remaining rooted in one’s homeland; conversely, it is also possible to retain a limiting sense of national and cultural affiliation while traveling and even living all over the world” (109). Mukherjee and Lahiri characterize women in their works of fiction in ways that mark any categorical notion of national allegiance or cultural purity as an impossibility in a world in which the diaspora is everywhere and no-place. The histories of displacement and migration which frame post-partition Bengali life in particular are rendered as the implicit context of the transnational experiences those characters have, which are radically diverse. Additionally, because national origin is but one facet of identity, which intersects with and is affected by so many other facets, any strong theory that makes deterministic claims about the ways that one set of cultural traditions liberates women as another set constrains them is doomed to suffer continual exceptions. Jackson goes on to point out that:

[T]he specificities of individual experience and the complexities of interpersonal interaction within a global framework encourages a vision of human beings as individuals rather than members of nations or other exclusionary communities. Such a vision implies an ethical imperative for individuals to think beyond the boundaries of self, community and nation in their interactions with others. (115)

Reading across this corpus of texts by two diasporic women writing about the lived experiences of other imagined diasporic women allows that vision to be understood in its manifold iterations. There are instances where cultural difference and gendered oppression line up neatly so that claims about the constraints of Hindu values upon Bengali women are supportable through a wealth of evidence. However, there are just as many instances when the norms of Western culture disempower and even victimize women in ways that Bengali culture would not, or when issues of gendered oppression seems to cross national and cultural borders crafting more common critiques of transnational misogyny than of culturally-specific codes about women's behavior in the institution of marriage. The fiction simultaneously obfuscates and reveals the complex processes of transculturation, because identity-formation after displacement is doubly troubled by gendered and cultural identities that are altered or recontextualized through sex and marriage, as Bengali and American women are regularly socially redefined by their

sexual behavior and romantic attachments. Reading this fiction encourages a more nuanced consideration of how displacement confounds the notions of identity produced by a longstanding legacy of feminist thought about sex and marriage. In depicting Bengali marriage in the diaspora as both a conduit of transnational movement and as dynamic, multifaceted and varied in its adherence to cultural norms, Mukherjee and Lahiri confront preconceptions about Indian identity and gender politics, and explore the particular pressures the diaspora brings to bear upon women's abilities to produce for themselves an identity that occupies an individual subjective space in an increasingly globalized society.

WORKS CITED

- Bhaumik, Rajib. "Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter*: The Woman Protagonist's Strange Trepidation in the Homeland" *The Criterion*. 6.1 (2015): n. pag. 17 April 2016. <<http://www.the-criterion.com/bharati-mukherjees-the-tigers-daughter-the-woman-protagonists-strange-trepidation-in-the-homeland/#.WWnTkIiGPIU>>
- Brennan, Timothy. "Cosmo-Theory." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.3 (2001): 659-687.
- Caesar, Judith. "American Spaces in the Fiction of Jhumpa Lahiri." *English Studies in Canada*. 31.1 (2005): 50-69.
- Dhivya, K. S. and K. Ravindran. "A Thematic Analysis of a Few Select Novels of Bharati Mukherjee." *Language in India*. 16.5 (2016): 65-80.
- Jackson, Elizabeth. "Transcending the Politics of 'Where You're From': Postcolonial Nationality and Cosmopolitanism in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*." *Ariel* 43.1 (2012): 109-126.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.

____. *The Namesake*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. New York: Grove P, 1989.

____. *The Middleman and Other Stories*. New York: Grove P, 1999.

____. *The Tiger's Daughter*. New York: Ballantine, 1971.

Ninh, Erin Khue. "Gold-Digger: Reading the Marital and National Romance in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*". *MELUS* 38.3 (2013): 146-186.

Pasupathi, Monisha. "Arranged Marriages: What's Love Got to Do with It?". *Inside the American Couple: New Thinking/New Challenges*. Eds. Yalom, Marilyn, et. al. Los Angeles: U California P, 2002.

Rana, Jyoti. "The Diaspora: From Enculturation to Acculturation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*". *Language in India*. 13.12 (2013): 417-428.

Reddy, Vanita. "Jhumpa Lahiri's Feminist Cosmopolitics and the Transnational Beauty Assemblage". *Meridians*. 11.2 (2013): 29-59.

Saha, Amit Shankar. "The Indian Diaspora and Reading Desai, Mukherjee, Gupta and Lahiri." *Comparative Literature and Culture* 14.2 (2012): 2-8.

Song, Min Hyoung. "The Children of 1965: Allegory, Postmodernism, and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*." *Twentieth Century Literature*. 53.3 (2007): 345-370.