

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

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Abstract:

Much of the short fiction by Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri is populated by female characters living in the diaspora, and that setting comes to constrain their identities. Lahiri and Mukherjee produce narratives about the intersections of ethnic and gendered identity, which are often complicated by heteroromantic relationships and national borders. Some of the characters immigrate through marriage; others test the adaptability of Bengali martial customs in increasingly Americanized contexts, and still others negotiate their own identities from within multicultural relationships. A close look at how marriage is portrayed in 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)—helps to inform the ways in which feminist theory and practice responds to the challenges Indian women living in the United States face. The fiction simultaneously obfuscates and reveals transcultural pressures and permutations; identity-formation after immigration and displacement is doubly troubled by gendered and cultural identities that are altered or recontextualized through sex and marriage. Lahiri and

Mukherjee encourage a more nuanced consideration of 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 and multifaceted in its adherence to various cultural norms, the writers implicitly call readers to confront preconceptions about Indian identity and gender politics, and to explore the particular pressures the diaspora brings to bear upon women's abilities to produce for themselves an identity that occupies an individuated subjective space in an increasingly globalized society.

Keywords: Lahiri, Jhumpa (writer), Mukherjee, Bharati (writer), Marriage, Feminist theory, Transculturation, Indian American/Bengali, American, Immigration