



HAL
open science

Acquiring “ Unaccustomed ” Rights: Women’s Romantic Ambitions in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth (2008)

Ahmed Mulla

► **To cite this version:**

Ahmed Mulla. Acquiring “ Unaccustomed ” Rights: Women’s Romantic Ambitions in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Unaccustomed Earth (2008). *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2013, Women’s Right, Human Rights, 38, pp.130-145. hal-02340349

HAL Id: hal-02340349

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02340349>

Submitted on 30 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Acquiring “Unaccustomed” Rights: Women’s Romantic Ambitions in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) Armed With

Though the notion of rights rarely comes to mind when one deals with cultural studies, there is nevertheless no denying that rules that govern human communities are the result of individual or collective deliberations. Rights are not granted *per se* but come into discussion and into effects from the moment a previous mode of social functioning becomes problematic to some members of the community, whether they form the majority or a minority of the whole group. In this sense, no matter how monolithic or rigid the legal system of a nation may appear, there is always room for adjustments, improvements, in one word, creation, as far as an individual feels or is really usurped, or lays claim to some novel rights. But while the cultural life of a society can consist in an infinite addition and, sometimes, aggregation and hybridization of diverse productions, what happens on the legal level is definitely more intricate for the simple reason that the social fabric does not always permit the introduction of new laws, specifically dedicated to a subgroup, without impacting another or, for better or worse, the whole community of citizens. Rights granted to some can be considered as unfair privileges by others, and *vice versa*.

Among the many authors who delve into the exploration of the experiences of minorities, Jhumpa Lahiri tries, in her short stories as well as in her novels, to shed some light on the multiple questions that arise when one is lost in foreign territories. This American author, born in England in 1967 from Indian parents and who has lived in the States for most of her life, is clearly interested in the exploration of the theme of life in exile. In her oeuvre, she precisely deals with the difficulties of cultural adaptation to Western societies as encountered by Indian migrants or their progenies. The use of the word “difficulties” should not be interpreted here as some sort of resistance of the various protagonists against assimilation; in fact, female ones, especially those belonging to the second generation, are deliberately eager to be cultural defectors, to move away from customs embodied by their parents, but in a way which reveals the inner turmoil that characterizes the not-so-easy passage from one realm to another. What is inadvisable, undesirable or forbidden at home is then acknowledged, permissible or allowed at the national level. The awareness that they had supposedly been deprived of what is presented as universal rights triggers the irresistible desire to experience the same status and attributes as those of native citizens.

The characters of Sang in the short story “Nobody’s Business” and Hema in the *novella* titled “Hema and Kaushik”⁷³ embody the dilemma children of immigrants go through, especially when they are born in the United States, far away from their parents’ country which symbolizes an immemorial code they are still supposed to follow and respect. The multicultural American context provides the coexistence of multiple categories of persons who abide by different types of laws. Some of them are applied individually or in the privacy of home, while others concern the whole nation. Because of their entangled heritages, Sang and Hema are caught between different systems. The incidences of this particular situation are yet to be investigated in the field of human rights. Actually, it remains to be seen whether these characters suffer more from the existence of an imposed set of rules, or feel rather in tune with a certain conception of American moral liberalism, or are eventually able to make the most of the different shades that are to be created between the primary colors of women rights as they exist in America and within the Indian traditions.

Apart from vital needs, and considered from a philosophical point of view, freedom appears to be one of the most sought-after rights of mankind. It is all the more a pertinent goal and concept whenever postcolonial and feminist theories are concerned. In fact, postcolonial and feminist literatures have been characterized by the need to redefine the Self and by the idea of emancipation. Individuals portrayed in these works are seen engaging all their efforts in freeing themselves from inherited ancestral duties that bind them to their communities, families, traditions or religions. In this sense, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which proclaims that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” can be questioned. In fact, absolute freedom is hardly imaginable; it is for the least a philosophical concept, a mere utopia. Every individual is actually the product of strong familial, social and cultural determinisms. And according to feminist theories, in comparison to other beings, it is the woman who has suffered more effectively from these external definitions. Right from her birth,⁷⁴ she is granted⁷⁵ a name and an agenda for her future. In Jhumpa Lahiri’s works, it is a feminine

⁷³ Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth*, New Delhi: Random House, 2008. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁷⁴ Since we are exclusively dealing with female protagonists, a deliberately feminist point of view is required. To further conform by this logic, we will try, as long as that is possible, to disavow strong cultural practices in this essay by using feminine nouns and pronouns in our general conceptualizations.

⁷⁵ We can ask ourselves whether what is attributed to the other is necessarily a blessing for her. And more closely to our subject of concern, it will not be useless to study whether a granted right is less or more profitable to the individual than one that has been the result of hard struggle.

figure who more frequently takes the lead in the struggle towards emancipation. If only for this reason, it seems relevant to adopt a feminist reading of her texts in order to observe in which directions the lahirian woman is led by her own aspirations.

Moreover, freeing oneself from a former order by abandoning its views is one thing; doing so by wishing to adopt the customs of another group has radically different significations. The passage from one cultural sphere to another is often deemed a transgression, not unlike the will formulated by the romantic hero to get accepted in an upper-class; and all the more so since there is, right from the beginning, no intention to go back. These knotty considerations lead us towards the suggestion that the rebellion characterizing the romantic hero of yesteryear is at play in the narratives here studied, since the latter seems to be postcolonial and feminine variations of the former.

In Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Nobody’s Business,” the main protagonist takes the reins of her life by abandoning the name given by her parents. She substitutes Sangeeta Biswas, “her official name” (177), by Sang with the persons she meets now (174). By grasping the right to rename herself, not officially though, this young woman tries to get rid of what she perceives as her parents’ influence on her and their appropriation of her identity. She also does so by living on her own, far away from home (*ibid.*). These concomitant acts are generally viewed as the preliminary steps that lead towards a woman’s emancipation. Disruptive as they are, they obviously represent an unprecedented loss in her personal history. We can assume that by shortening her name, the protagonist attributes herself a new right over her life, thus becoming her own creation, to a certain extent; but in the same movement, she deletes a part of her own self, however alienating the latter might be. A cultural legacy can be seen as oppressive; however, one cannot ignore its contribution in structuring an individual. Removing elements of one’s identity can rarely be harmless.

One has to bear in mind that Sang’s feat is a genuine break from the practices that prevail in India, her parents’ homeland, where it is clearly unconceivable that an unmarried woman should live away from her family’s home. Such a situation, which is quite infrequent due to social and moral pressures, gives way, when it occurs, to ample speculation. One has all reasons to suppose that being in America provides Sang with the ability to imagine the possibility to escape her original world, to conceive her destiny in opposition to what is expected of her. The right to decide for oneself, as a newly acquired faculty, especially for women, implies the apprenticeship of the

sense of responsibilities. As Indira Gandhi, the only female Prime Minister India has ever known, rightly argues: “[w]hether they like it or not, [women] cannot escape their responsibility” (quoted by Behtash & Sajjadi 113). From then on, Sang has to assume that she cannot blame her parents for whatever happens to her. Nevertheless, it is doubtful to consider that this young woman acts as a responsible person if we take into account the fact that she does not evaluate the impacts her decisions have on her parents.

Within the Indian traditional system, girls are not given much scope for personal and intellectual growth. They are taken care of, sometimes negligently and sometimes with the best of intentions, as an *amaanat*, a deposit to be preserved for her real purpose as a future mother, for she is destined to belong to her husband’s family. Attention must be paid to this precise detail, because even the husband has no real right to autonomy, as he is considered as a member of the joint-family, a unit composed of different generations of the same family who cohabit under the same roof and where decisions are taken by elders, in whose hands power is concentrated. After her wedding, a woman is the property of her in-laws⁷⁶, and her parents have no rights on her. By escaping her familial setting, Sang unsettles a Pandora’s box for she operates an unforeseen move. Whether this step leads to a dysfunctional identity remains to be investigated. However, the main issue of concern here is to examine to what extent a woman who is not married, who is not “settled,” who has no defined status within her cultural context, can still experience a sense of achievement in her existence.

As surprising as this can be, even after her desertion, Sang’s parents work towards what they view as her fulfillment, that is to say her integration within a normal life trajectory. In the *novella* “Hema and Kaushik,” Hema’s mother is preoccupied because her daughter is still single at an age when women traditionally bring up teenagers. “[She] even asked, on Hema’s thirty-fifth birthday, if she preferred women” (297). Unmarried women are causes of incomprehension in the judging eyes of society. They are also sources of anxiety for their parents, who persistently wish the latter did not bring shame upon the family. This explains the extreme helplessness experienced by these persons. “[A]ccording to Sang, [her parents] desperately wanted her to be married” (174). The finality of a woman’s life is precisely to be married; this is the sole status recognized and accepted by the community. There is no room for bohemian life, for being on one’s own. A woman has always to be integrated within a family structure: her parents’ during child-

⁷⁶ We have a particularly poignant illustration of this phenomenon in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story “Clothes” in the collection titled *Arranged Marriage* (1997).

hood, and her in-laws’ afterwards and for the rest of her existence. There is no other alternative for her, no way out. The *Manusmriti*, which is an ancient religious code that influences social interactions within the community of Hindu followers even today, specifies the bonds that tie a woman all along her life: “Her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth, and her sons protect [her] in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (Buhler 56). The right to experiment life on an individual level does simply not exist for a woman.

It is clear then that Sang’s decision to move away from her family circle constitutes a deliberate transgression of centennial rules. Nevertheless, in reaction to a never seen before act of rebellion against traditional ways, her parents adopt an attitude common to many Indians who wish their daughters to get settled. They circulate an attractive image of Sang within the Bengali community so that the young men who wish to get married have a ready-made profile at their disposal. “[T]hey’d heard that she was pretty and smart and thirty and Bengali and still single [...] They were impressed that she was getting her doctorate at Harvard, when really she’d dropped out of Harvard after a semester and was working part time at a bookstore on the square” (174). As long as one is unmarried, it is of the highest importance to be, or at least to pretend to be, a blessing for the future groom, for no man wishes to make a losing choice while getting married. In Western societies, women have a complete autonomy in the elaboration of their projected personalities. Within the Indian society, parents play a leading role since they assist their daughters or, more often, take the lead in the building, in the conceptualization of the latter’s social image. In Sang’s case, it is obvious that her parents create the contour of a personality that is rather fantasized than true to reality. In doing so, they increase her chances to attract interesting proposals.

By using such a dishonest device, Sang’s parents try to fulfill their duties towards their daughter. They secure her future even after she has chosen a path, a lifestyle that should have logically deprived her, as well as her parents, of an honorable status in society. In truth, Sang is a mere employee at a bookstore; she occupies an anonymous and banal position, if we refer to class distinctions. Nevertheless, prospective grooms, whose lot comprises of “an economist, [...] a dentist, [...] a metallurgical engineer” (175), are impressed by what they have heard about her scholarly curricular. It can be said, then, that, within this system, people are inclined towards preserving, or even enhancing their daughters’ reputations which seem to represent an inalienable right. At this level, parents are so dependent on their daughters’ re-

spectabilities that they have to protect them at all costs, or at least to preserve the belief that these girls have a secure professional future and are still morally innocent.

As a result of all this publicity, the young woman is much sought-after. “Every so often a man called for Sang, wanting to marry her” (174). However, the protagonist resents these proposals from unknown men. Actually, and contrary to her parents, Sang does not expect this kind of courtship. “[S]he complained. How dare these men call? She’d say. How dare they hunt her down? It was a violation of her privacy, an insult to her adulthood. It was pathetic” (175). We can assume that the young woman’s decision to leave her parents’ home was precisely motivated by the desire to flee a suffocating community atmosphere defined by social promiscuity and interference in people’s intimate lives. It can also be viewed as a wish to assert her personality in complete independence. Nevertheless, claiming such rights, which appear to be common in Western societies as far as women are concerned, still constitutes an insurmountable wager within the Indian diaspora. Such intrusive behaviors from the part of men and their families are to be considered as the continuation of the war of the sexes by other means; in fact, in the guise of a gallant courtship, they represent ideological imprisoning attempts in the sense that the only outcome proposed is the traditional wedding. Apart from the old patriarchal scheme, there seems to be no way out. Moreover, the multiplicity of more or less anonymous suitors adds to the pressure that drives a woman to get eventually married and it can also give way to a paranoid sense of aggression, as experienced by Sang.

In fact, the young protagonist is fairly aware that all these flourishes around her are caused by superficial, if not false, reasons. “These men weren’t really interested in her. They were interested in a mythical creature created by an intricate chain of gossip, a web of wishful Indian-community thinking [...]. Had they any idea who she actually was and how she made a living, [...] they would want nothing to do with her” (176). We may have the impression that Sang is bothered because she is deprived of her actual identity, because she is known as somebody she is definitely not; but in fact the most significant cause of dissatisfaction lays elsewhere. To fit into her own community seems to be an impossible challenge for Sang, for its criteria are clearly beyond her reach. One has to acquire a socially acceptable, not to say “impressive”, position and personality in order to be considered as a suitable bride. However, Sang is incapable of satisfying this demanding condition. She is a Harvard drop-out. “She’d had it with academia, hated how competitive it was, how monkish it forced one to become” (181). What Sang per-

ceives as deterring factors within the academic world nonetheless prevail in day-to-day social life, that is to say competition and conformism. One cannot conceive success away from the complex model formed by the combination of these elements. To get married also requires to conform to a certain pre-defined profile and to be competitive in the sense that, since men from the community seek socially valuing female partners, one has to outdo other potential brides. It is to a large extent because Sang cannot present the adequate profile that she abandons the competition, just as she escaped from what she considered to be the oppressive world of university.

In comparison to the patriarchal system prevailing in India, the country of origin where women are required to prepare themselves to be good housewives and good mothers, the situation is radically different in the context of exile. Though they lead reclusive lives in India, where they are rarely confronted to the outside world, in other words where they are dispensed and protected from the sometimes harsh realities of the professional sphere, women are expected to enter and to make a place for themselves in this competitive arena while in America. We can suppose that as members of a newly settled community, women are requested to participate in the economic consolidation of the group. For this reason, their presence in the professional world is no longer a taboo. While this shift in mentalities opens up new venues for women in terms of access to equality with men, there is no denying that this new perspective also brings along the idea that professional achievement is less a right than a duty.

However, some women blossom in their occupations. It is the case of Hema, the female protagonist of the *novella* “Hema and Kaushik”, an established American scholar. “She was a professor now, her dissertation on Lucretius a bound, published, quietly praised thing” (299). Unlike Sang, this young woman has been able to make her project come true and has reached a secure position in the academic world. If we take into account the criteria required by young men from the Indian community who are in search of a life partner, Hema easily qualifies for a top rank in their wish-lists. Nevertheless, even if the professional situations of these women differ, they seem to be in tune to dismiss the perspective of an “arranged marriage.” When her housemate is enthusiastic over the number of proposals Sang gets, the latter complains: “In Sang’s opinion it was practically an arranged marriage” (176). In the same vein, even if Hema agrees to get engaged to an Indian, she cannot accept the true implication of her decision. “She refused to think of it as an arranged marriage, but knew in her heart that that was what it was” (297). In fact, both these women have an aversion for this traditional practice be-

cause it implicitly signifies the acceptance of their parents' interference in their lives. This custom clearly belongs to a patriarchal context. Woman's life is decided upon by man, who still embodies power. Observers of the Indian society argue that the lack of concern for women, and consideration for their desires here, is deeply ingrained as "religion and culture underpin many of these attitudes" (Hundal n. p.). These women's adulthood does not provide them with a feeling of complete freedom and autonomy because in the Indian system, whatever one's age is, as long as one's parents are alive, one always remains their child, which means that all decisions, even those concerning very private matters, are taken by them.

In these conditions, since the choice of their future husbands is to be decided by others, these women are necessarily bound to experience an acute sense of frustration. However, they live in a society whose values are different from those of their parents; and, as far as these paradigms appear as more liberal, it is understandable that these women endorse them. Though Sang's housemate gets excited at the abundance of proposals the latter gets, the protagonist does not get confused and remains very lucid about the real nature of these men's "sentiments." "She told Sang the proposals were romantic, but Sang shook her head with disbelief: "It's not love" (176). The young woman identifies what are precisely absent from these matrimonial attempts: love and romanticism. Her sadness comes from the fact that these are what she is seeking in her heart of hearts. In other words, for individuals brought up in America, the concept of arranged marriage obviously seems outdated for it denies them the right to have a say in what is perhaps the most important decision of their lives.

One of the salient features of Jhumpa Lahiri's recent works, which is well illustrated in the narratives studied here, is the impulse especially felt by members of the second generation within the Indian diaspora to imagine and elaborate their destinies away from their parents' home. This move is symbolic of a strong desire of independence, of being freed from alienating duties from another country and another time. But the places chosen by these women for their new beginnings are not completely innocent. Sang moves to a flat where her housemates are White Americans (177). Hema, who usually works at Wellesley, is relieved to escape her duties for a whole semester due to a grant that allows her to stay in Rome, while her parents have definitively settled back in India (294). The choice of a new location gives an indication that cannot be mistaken on the realm in which an individual wishes to be assimilated, rooted. Hema and Sang have a double heritage, Indian and American, that comes from their parents and from the culture they have been

brought up in; but the choices they make, regarding their locations, their careers, the people they mingle with, make it clear they have an inclination towards the American world. This desire to belong to a slightly foreign universe is akin to what happens to what is known as the "romantic hero" in literary history. This specific type of character is obsessed by his being accepted within a society or a class he doesn't originally belong to, and he is often driven by political ideals and by the desire to be an achiever. Intertextual parallels to this genre can be found in Lahiri's texts, in which romantic heroines, as embodied by Hema and Sang, try to dilute, or even delete, their Indian heritages by a willful immersion within an American or European neighborhood. By the way, it must be noted that the passage from romantic hero to romantic heroine is not actually an act of mimicry, but the grafting of feminine sensibility to a rather old-fashioned literary type. On the ideological level, Hema and Sang's utopia consists in clearing away ancient Indian beliefs about women's duties pertaining to the acceptance of an imposed life partner who is, by essence, far from being a partner because he is bound to perpetuate the abhorred patriarchal system.

In truth, it is in the idealized, or idolized partners chosen by these female protagonists that we can have an idea of the latter's actual aspirations. Sang's boyfriend, Farouk, who wants to be called Freddy (185), is an Egyptian who teaches Middle Eastern history at Harvard (179). Hema's lover, Julian, is also an academic who lives and works in Amherst (296). The first impression one can get is that these men represent the kind of stability that can be appreciated by women who are trying to establish their own identities as independent beings. Furthermore, whether they are American citizens or not, these men also embody a certain assimilation, not to say acceptance, within a structured social and intellectual institution which is that of university. One cannot ignore the prestige associated with such a professional background. In this sense, the ability to attract the attention of men belonging to the intellectual elite and to symbolically move away from the middle class and its inherent values can be seen as an intellectual variation of the romantic hero pattern where the implicit praise of the power of the mind replaces that of financial achievement through sentimental alliances.

Though she gets interesting and decent proposals from well established men of her own community, Sang acutely perceives the blind social determinism that motivates these "sight unseen" proposals (175). We can infer that in her eyes, these men are only the submissive agents, the shadows of their community's explicit will. Within the system of arranged marriages, men, as well as women, are denied their intellectual and sensible, or affective, fac-

ulties. They are in no way actors of their choices. The terms and conditions of their marital lives are set by others, according to what appear as artificial criteria. If the life of the spirit has a certain meaning and value, one can wonder, together with Sang, whether it is worth or not to contemplate a whole lifetime with a man who, at one moment or another, has accepted to renounce his senses and sensibility. In other words, the right to be loved also supposes that the lover qualifies as a man in all his manliness, including his free will. Otherwise, for a woman who considers love as an absolute principle and virtue, the relationship is bound to be rather unsatisfactory. On an intellectual level, it is quite bothering to be involved in a relationship while being aware that the partner is precisely not entirely involved in the displayed outpouring of affection. As a consequence, Sang's belief in the cardinal value of love can justify her, at first, unconditional affair with Farouk, for the simple reason that it is not an arranged relationship.

In fact, Sang appears to be reveling in her own love story if we consider that the romantic hero as a genre is principally characterized by the main protagonist's fantasy about his noble feelings and motivations. For instance, Sang is proud to announce to her housemates that she has "a boyfriend" (176), as if the word itself held magic properties. This excitement can be understood if we keep in mind the fact that this protagonist comes from a society where out-of-wedlock affairs are forbidden. As a matter of fact, being able to claim having a boyfriend is akin to experiencing a right one would have never thought accessible. Furthermore, asserting that she "[has] a boyfriend" is a conscious proclamation of empowerment, since a possessive auxiliary is used here, a notion foreign to the traditional patriarchal system where the woman is the property of the male members of her family.

Nevertheless, Sang's infatuation about her love story and about her own position in the relationship are shattered by the elements that Paul, one of her housemates, who is a distant and supposedly detached witness of the affair⁷⁷, progressively gets to come aware of. For instance, one gathers that even though they have been together for three years, Farouk "still doesn't want [both of them] to live together" (179). Moreover, though he has a house of his own, he insists on Sang going back to her own flat after each of their meetings, pretending: "You know I don't sleep well when you're there" (189). Moreover, he doesn't even drive her back, considering himself as a dutiful lover since he pays for the cabs (*ibid.*). Very legitimately, Sang is deeply hurt

⁷⁷ Paul's neutrality can be judged doubtful since he is clearly attracted towards this exotic woman who by turns seems close and unreachable, and who gives the impression of being free while being in fact captive of so many injunctions, those of others as well as her own.

by those detrimental behaviors, which she describes as “abnormal” (*ibid.*). The fantasy she has in all probabilities built up over the years about courtship, love, romanticism, is put to pieces by the very man she is fondly in love with.

However, the notion of love is one that persistently escapes endeavors to define it. We can only trace the ways in which it is expressed by a specific character. “When she wasn’t with Farouk, [Sang] did things for him. She read through proofs of an article he’d written, checking it for typos. She scheduled his doctor’s appointments” (186). One can assume that these are activities a traditional spouse would usually offer to do. To a certain extent, we witness Sang, who has deliberately chosen to be a rebel, being at Farouk’s disposal. And one can doubt whether she *has* a boyfriend or *is* actually his girl; truly so, since she is seen taking care of his laundry (188 *our emphasis*), an attitude that causes her female housemate’s “disapproving expression” (*ibid.*). This kind of devotion constitutes a highly suspicious attitude coming from a woman who seeks a form of independence. One can wonder about the reasons that make her refuse to see that she is wholly subjugated by him; in other words, she is nothing more than an object at this man’s service, an object that is not even judged worth of becoming a part of his house.

The question of a woman’s status is prominent when one considers to which extent her rights are respected. If we need further proof of what Sang represents for Farouk, we get it from this woman’s complaints shared with her sister: “Tell me if you think this is normal . . . [H]e told me I smelled bad. Sweaty. He told me to wash under my arms. He kept saying it wasn’t a criticism, that people in love should be able to say things like that to each other” (190). At this stage, one can put in doubt the belief that chosen relationships, based on what is termed as love, offer more latitude in terms of fulfillment and personal happiness than the system of arranged marriages. In spite of her own dedication towards this man, Sang is flagrantly not paid in return. She is trapped into an asymmetric relationship in which she finds herself at the losing end. If she has till then fantasized about love as a means of emancipation, as compared to the constraining practice of arranged marriages, Sang has all reasons to be dramatically disillusioned. The conception of love as being the highest degree of sophistication that the relationship between a man and a woman can reach is seriously shattered by Farouk’s assertion. Though this man is a university professor, we find no overtone of distinction, and not even of good manners, in his words. His conduct is inappropriate, particularly since it is addressed towards a woman. Such an interaction between persons of different sexes requires him to be gentlemanly above all

else. However, his rude remarks give a precise view of the way he considers women as inferior beings he has to humiliate in order to keep under his psychological control. Farouk has no consideration for a woman's rights, not even the most essential right to dignity. By instilling doubt about her own attractiveness, he transforms Sang's expectation of love as just an act of tolerance from his part. As a consequence, he shatters her self-respect and, by extension, her identity.

Sang rightly asks her sister if all this is normal, for her dreamlike picture of love has been reduced to pieces. She finds herself in a situation she cannot understand. It does not correspond to the romantic bond which is conceived and represented as a harmonious construct in the collective imagination. To a large extent, the system of arranged marriages is rejected by youngsters because the resulting relationships appear to be conventional and outdated, supposedly devoid of romantic discursive exchanges which can be perceived as an essential right, especially for women who never know the reasons for which they have been chosen as life partners. In works of art, and even in popular culture, love comes into being through discourse, through the assessment or through the endeavor to assess the sentiments one feels for the other. For ages, seduction has been linked to the rhetorical art of persuasion. It is, in essence, a way to satisfy the narcissistic urge of the other, to offer her a flattering image of herself. If we take into account this universal need to be comforted into one's belief in one's worthiness, Farouk's conception of what he calls love constitutes an act of deliberate violence. His offensive takes on what forms part of Sang's dignity is simply inhumane. And though this woman is rightly affected by these crude remarks, it remains difficult to understand why she does not think about breaking up with Farouk.

It seems that, far from liberating her, as she had expected, the relationship Sang contracted with her lover has in fact alienated her in a sense that differs from what an arranged marriage would have done, has held her captive even without legal or religiously consecrated ties. If one considers an affair as the least constraining bond that can exist between man and woman, the example offered by Sang is here to prove that one becomes the prisoner of one's own incapacity to free oneself from relationships that hurt, that one's absence of pragmatism, as expressed in one's persistent blind belief in the sheer absoluteness of the love received can finally end at one's expense. Because, apart from being at first a narcissistic need, love also consists in giving, in abdicating a part of one's egoistic drive to the other's profit. This is precisely what Sang willfully accepts doing: renouncing her own self, right to the point where she becomes the accomplice of the one who constantly

abuses and hurts her. When, at last, Sang discovers that all this while Farouk has been cheating on her with another woman, she naturally confronts him (212-15). In the privacy of Farouk's apartment, they get into a fight. “There were welts emerging above her neckline, fresh and bright” (214). When a policeman comes to inquire, she nevertheless refuses to accuse Farouk. “He asked Sang, who was still on the floor, if Farouk had struck her. Sang shook her head [...]. Her voice was thick, ashamed. ‘I did this to myself’” (214-15). By putting the blame on herself, Sang symbolically admits her own mistake in her belief in the superiority of love. Having taken the reins of her own life for a while, as per her conviction in her rights to live according to her wishes, this woman has the intellectual honesty to endorse the full responsibility of her acts.

Hema, conversely, is, right from the start, aware that Julian, her lover, belongs to another woman, for he is married (296). But she is convinced it is only a matter of months, and is persuaded that their clandestine meetings will eventually become legitimate enough to be rightfully displayed. “She has accompanied Julian secretly [to Rome], still confident in those days that his divorce was a matter of time” (295-96). As in the case of Sang, Hema's parents are not aware of her affair (297-98). However she is, more than Sang, obsessed by the idea of giving an official status to the relationship she has with this professor: “Even as she looked for the home her parents had helped her to buy in Newton, even as she sat signing the closing papers in the lawyer's office, [...] she believed that eventually she would have to add Julian's name” (298). Since she throws herself in a forbidden relationship, both because Julian is a married man and because her own traditions do not permit an affair out of the holy bonds of marriage, Hema is preoccupied by the necessity to formalize things. However, there is no question of any feeling of guilt on her part. She never gives the impression of being tormented by the concept of sin, by the consciousness of being a transgressor. Her concern has to do with her own rights as a woman, notwithstanding other considerations.

For instance, importance is given to her frustration. “So much of their affair had taken place in hotel and motel rooms. [...] It was never possible to see each other at Julian's home in Amherst” (296). Even if, to a large extent, she revels in her relationship, Hema is still unsatisfied with the place she occupies, or is allowed to occupy, in Julian's life. We have no cue concerning Julian's actual feelings towards her; but while he is away with his mistress, he “fulfills” his duties as a husband and as a father by keeping in touch with members of his family. “Every few days Julian spoke to his wife and daugh-

ters, asking them how things were” (*ibid.*). One is rather inclined to consider that this man is attached to his close ones. Later on, it is assumed that the time Hema spent with Julian had been “years of uncertainty” (298). In fact, just as in the case of Sang, Hema’s love affair remains an illegitimate episode of her life, a period in which she has no status in the eyes of society, because she represents a hidden aspect of Julian’s existence.

Though she is just a parenthesis in her lover’s life, not once does Hema try to figure out the consequences of her presence on Julian’s legitimate family. She does not care about what are, after all, another woman’s rights. On the contrary, she is shown as somebody who has consistently endeavored to imagine herself as his actual wife, to the extent that when everything is finished the narrative mentions “that long involvement, enough to make her feel, at times, like a divorced woman” (312). Here also, the emphasis is put on the notion of devotion, which is supposed to be a criterion allowing the lover the right to claim her due, in other words her being acknowledged as a partner in life. Long after their story has finished, when confronted to other women who have succeeded in founding a family of their own, Hema suddenly feels

inexperienced [...], innocent of the responsibilities of rearing children [...]. She had grown used to this feeling over the years with Julian – her position as the other woman, which had felt so sophisticated when their affair began, was actually a holding pen that kept her from growing up. She has denied herself the pleasure of openly sharing life with the person she loved, denied herself even the possibility of thinking about children. (301)

Here, and most precisely in the last sentence, one can replace the words “pleasure” and “possibility” with that of “right”. The presence of Julian’s wife, which does not deter her from pursuing her quest for love, limits Hema’s experience considerably because, even in terms of future, she is denied the right to elaborate projects for herself.

In the end, because there are certain life injunctions a woman cannot eternally ignore, Hema accepts to change her life perspective. “It was her inability, ultimately, to approach middle age without a husband, without children, [...] it was her unwillingness to abide that life indefinitely that led her to Navin” (298). Hema realizes that her love story with Julian provides her with no future, and when her parents ask her to meet a professor who comes from India, she finally agrees (297). After experiencing failure in her freely chosen path, Hema is determined not to repeat the same mistake all over

again, and, as a consequence, renounces to give way to her vision of what a woman's right should be. Severely shaken by her love story, she finally accepts to live according to her parents' terms and conditions as far as her wedding is concerned, in a fatalist resignation.

All in all, however legitimate their claim for rights might be, there are undertones of selfishness in the cases of Hema and Sang. Their decision to desert home and to design their own paths in life inevitably impacts their parents' confidence in their capacity to provide a good future to their daughters, since this is their traditional duty, and puts their dignity in a quandary. As said before, acquiring new rights is very often at the detriment of others. But for women who are enamored by the freedom granted to other Americans, the experiments on the route to emancipation are an adventure worth trying. Rejecting all kinds of unavoidable duties, such as the need to be financially, socially, and virtuously correct, or the acceptance of an imposed life partner, feels tremendously exciting and empowering at first. The self-attribution of the right to rename oneself, or to live in total independence from one's parents, or, more importantly, to choose one's romantic companion, provides an actual sense of achievement.

However, Hema and Sang make the cruel experience of learning that mentalities do not change as easily and as quickly as they had perhaps imagined. The unmarried woman is still suspect; she has no approved status and there is no right that can attribute her some dignity of any kind. Moreover, Hema as well as Sang never become the equal partners of the men they love; they always remain objects, kept in a remote section of the latter's lives. These women never get the right to be the addressees of sheer love and respect as promised, or sold, by the laws of romanticism. In clear, these women's experiences remain unsatisfactory and do not seem to have the potential to create a sort of jurisprudence. In the end, Hema and Sang's relative renunciation of their dreams makes us wonder whether, in Jhumpa Lahiri's view, women's rights are not better taken care of by traditional laws and customs than by modern and liberal Western practices.

Ahmed Mulla⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Ahmed MULLA is presently a junior lecturer at the Université de La Réunion. His PhD thesis deals with the theme of identity conflicts within Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction and the main argument concentrates on the destructive and constructive aspects of diasporic experiences, both on cultural and personal levels. His main research field covers postcolonial literary studies, and his focus is on Caribbean and American authors of Indian origin.

WORKS CITED

- The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, New York: United Nations, 1948.
- BEHTASH, Esmail Zare & SAJJADI, Fatemeh. "Literary feminism in India," *Journal of Sub-continent Researches*, 4(11), summer 2012, 107-17.
- BUHLER, George. *Laws of Manu* (translation), Delhi: Penguin Book, 1992.
- DIVAKARUNI, Chitra Banerjee. *Arranged Marriage*, London: Black Swan Books, 1997.
- HUNDAL, Sunny. *India Dishonoured: Behind a Nation's War on Women*, London: Guardian Books, 2013.
- LAHIRI, Jhumpa. *Unaccustomed Earth*, New Delhi: Random House, 2008.
-