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Identity without Connection

Jhumpa Lahiri is a writer who illustrates the feeling of displacement through her stories of the human experience. The people in her stories undergo a transitional period in their life of finding themselves and figuring out their place in the world. It's hard to truly encapsulate what it feels like to be disconnected from a culture, and in a world where it feels like the environment itself is attempting to wash away portions of yourself. Lahiri, does her best to show her readers what it's like to experience that disconnect, as well as show the companionship and bond that can grow out of accepting a situation without sacrificing a portion of yourself.

Within her story a *Temporary Matter*, we are introduced to Shoba and Shukumar, a couple who rarely spends time with each other and whose relationship seems teetering over the edge of breakup. This relationship is tested when their power goes out, and the two are forced to eat their meals together. While doing this, they play a game where they tell each other secrets. This eventually leads to them revealing darker and darker secrets: from expressing the plans of moving out, to even revealing that Shukumar had seen their stillborn child. Over the course of the story we see how the candle light at dinner provides the truth to the parts of themselves that they have kept from each other. Their relationship becomes more and more rocky as each secret is revealed, and as confusion and expectation eats them alive at the next reveal they are to hear.

Eventually though, this tether between the two seems so frayed that its bound to break. Then the lights come on. Shukumar attempts to go back to the way things are, before the power went out, thinking this is what should happen. Shoba then turns off the lights herself, and the two share a moment with each other:

She came back to the table and sat down, and after a moment Shukumar joined her. They wept together, for the things they now knew. (Lahiri 24)

The two finally able to admit their last secret of grief with each other as their last tether to each other finally snaps. A sad story for sure, but one of growth and moving on.

Another story of similar style revolves around *Mrs. Sens* and her struggle to feel as though she fits in this new world. The struggle for immigrants is a very real heartache that is well presented within this story. Mrs Sens, a babysitter, takes care of a boy, Eliot, for his mother. Mrs Sens undergoes lots of shifts and changes as the story progresses, to even for moments feeling like she might just fit, only to be shown the reality. She spends her time throughout the story attempting to maintain portions of herself and to not get taken by assimilation. She attempts to cook her own food, as well as find someone to date. All of her attempts though seem fruitless. Using driving as her freedom in the end causes her to get into a car crash with Elliot, which results in her firing. Likely leading to her to continue feeling as if she was an outsider. This of course wasn't the case to Eliot, who despite asking multiple questions about the foreign nature of her culture, said this about her:

She had a small gap between her teeth and faded pockmarks on her chin, yet her eyes were beautiful, with thick, flaring brows and liquid flourishes that extended beyond the natural width of the lids. She wore a shimmering white sari patterned

with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon. Her lips were coated in a complementary coral gloss, and a bit of the color had strayed beyond the borders.

Yet it was his mother, Eliot had thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes, who looked odd. (Lahiri 124-125)

Showing the audience just how Eliot viewed Mrs Sens; Not as some foreign creature to be studied and prodded, but instead a person who, by themselves, is from a place that should be respected and learned from, and not tolerated or changed.

The story *Sexy* by Lahiri also contains a lot of these themes. Specifically *Sexy* tells the story of a woman, Miranda, presently engaged in an affair. This affair makes Miranda feel, as the title would suggest, Sexy. Beyond that though this makes Miranda feel wanted, needed, and like she belongs. As the story progresses we see her interact with this life she leads with the man, Dev. She attempts to tell Dev about her childhood in India, this attention pushes her again to feeling like she belongs. Eventually after finding out about the kid that Dev and his wife have, she elects to stop seeing him again, and figures out that she doesn't need that positive enforcement to be and to love herself.

The last story to talk about is *The Third and Final Continent*. Which most perfectly represents the feeling of being out of place and even eventually finding peace. Our main character is a Bengali man who went to London in 1964 to pursue studies, and waited for his wife to join him. While on the journey over he hears from a fellow passenger that in order to thrive in London one needs to assimilate to the lifestyle. And that he does, even going as far as to leave milk on the windowsill thinking that it is the appropriate thing to do. Eventually, his wife's

arrival date comes closer, and he decides to find an apartment. This leads our protagonist to rent a room in the house of Mrs. Croft. Mrs. Croft is the embodiment of the other, the unknown to our main character. As time goes on, her eccentric personality shines through. While not mean or malevolent, her personality does often confuse the protagonist; As well as her fascination with the recent moon landing - constantly provoking him to say “Splendid,” in response to her daily conjecture. Eventually though the man's wife arrives and has left Mrs. Croft's abode, and, in a way, embodies what the protagonist was in the beginning. Viewing the oddities of a new world and struggling to find what parts of herself to hold onto and what to let go of. As the couple walks they happen upon Mrs. Croft's house. Entering, he and his wife have a conversation and exchange revelries with one another once again. Mrs. Croft expresses about her recent hip injury and the situation that followed. Upon being asked what he thought about it, the protagonist responds, “As stunned as I was, I knew what I had to say. With no hesitation at all, I cried out, ‘Splendid!’” (Lahirir 212). The heartwarming moment is definitely one of Lahirir's best moments compared to the drabness that exists across the other stories in the collection.

Eventually as the story comes to a close, and much time has passed, our protagonist leaves us with one last line:

While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in

which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri 216).

This last line sticks with me, expressing just how much a new world, regardless of if it's the moon itself or a new country, is a feat of its own making. To be able to thrive in a new world where all is alien and to retain one's soul should be an accomplishment not understated. Across all of these stories the feeling of this otherworldliness is near toxic to the characters. Some are coming to the noxious gas, while others finding their legs and being able to run. It's hard to keep yourself when it feels like the world is striving to turn you into something just like everyone else. It's important to keep yourself, your identity, and your culture intact. Without that you end up as something far less human.

Works Cited

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Flamingo, 2000.