

RESEARCH ARTICLE



JHUMPA LAHIRI IS HERSELF A SECOND GENERATION IMMIGRANT

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ABSTRACT

JhumpaLahiri is herself a second-generation immigrant, and in most of her stories her characters are also in exile in some sense or the other. Her characters area seen to be navigating between the inherited traditions of home and the new traditions of their adopted country. Lahiri says in an interview published by Houghton Mifflin that the name of this anthology has been inspired by a real lifeacquaintance of hers. One of her Russian friends in America was interpretingRussian for an American doctor who had many Russian patients. She says in anonline interview, "A Conversation with JhumpaLahiri", given to Houghton Mifflin Books:

When I was putting the collection together, I knew from the beginning that this had to be the title story, because it best expresses, thematically, the predicament at the heart of the book — the dilemma, the difficulty, and often the impossibility of communicating emotional pain and affliction to others, as well as expressing it to ourselves. In some senses I view my position as a writer, in so far as I articulate these emotions, as a sort of interpreter as well. ("A Conversation with JhumpaLahiri")

The role of the author as the cultural interpreter for an American audience is seen in many contemporary Asian-American writers like Amy Tan, Andre Dubos, Ha Jin, Gail Tsukiyama and many others. In this collection JhumpaLahiri acts as a cultural interpreter, perhaps helping the readers understand people who may misunderstand one another and make the readers see the world through different lenses.

KEY WORDS: Immigrant, Expresses, Interpreter, Characters

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The title story in the collection tells the story of a young second generation couple, Mr. and Mrs. Das, who have come to India for a vacation. Mr. Kapasi, their guide to the Sun Temple finds it difficult to believe that: "they were regularly responsible for anything other than themselves"

(*Interpreter of Maladies* 49). The selfishness of the young parents who seem to be very little bothered about their young children surprises Mr. Kapasi, yet being brought up on American values, thesis perhaps nothing unusual to this couple. The attitude of Mrs. Das towards her children can be contrasted

to the widowed mother of the female protagonist in Chitra Divakaruni's story "The Word Love" who had lived only for her daughter when she had been widowed at a very young age. Divakaruni too in many of her stories brings out this new desire of the immigrants to live their lives on their own terms without the cloying sense of duty and responsibility that the Indian value system inculcates in them. But unlike Divakaruni's Meera in her short story "A Perfect Life" who is flooded with maternal love when she sees a young boy on her doorstep, Mrs. Das seems to be occupied in a world of her own, almost uncaring of her own children. The readers realize later that this might be because Mrs. Das suffers from a secret malady. This is a story of Mrs. Das's guilt that shadows the couple's present happiness and of unresolved silences spoiling her marital relationship.

Mr. Kapasi, the official interpreter of maladies had in the past: "dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides" (Interpreter of Maladies 52), and is reduced to being the "interpreter of maladies" "for the local doctor and his Gujarati patients. Mr. Kapasi is intoxicated with the romance of such attention being showered on his job; his wife on the other hand had only disdain for his job. He dreams of how the correspondence between Mrs. Das and him will finally allow him his dream of being an "interpreter between nations" "between their different cultures. But his dreams are rudely shattered when he realizes that Mrs. Das too had not given him any individuality. For her too, he is just an interpreter of maladies. She opens out to him her silence of guilt about her illegitimate son, the knowledge of which is ruining her marriage. She expects a miracle from Mr. Kapasi that will cure her of her illness, but Mr. Kapasi is merely an interpreter and has no magic drug to offer.

In the presentation of Mr. and Mrs. Das, who look like Indians, but dress and speak like Americans, Lahiri brings out the immigrant experience through the eyes of Mr. Kapasi. Like Lahiri they too visit India like tourists every couple of years. Mr. Das carries a foreign edition of a traveller's guide. For them, it is just another tourist spot and Mr. Das

plans of making one of the better snaps of their trip into a Christmas card that the family will be sent to their close ones. The visitors find that the Chandrabhaga River had dried up: "It was no longer possible to enter the temple [Sun Temple of Konark], for it had filled with rubbles years ago,, but they admired the exterior, as did all tourists" (*Interpreter of Maladies* 57). The statement becomes a metaphor for the spiritual and cultural break down of the inherited values of the home country. They visit the temple like tourists and feel none of the religious connection to it like Mr. Kapasi does. They are different from their parents, who in Lahiri's stories often retire to the home country and have a much more immediate connection with their homeland like Mrs. Sen in "Mrs. Sen's". Lahiri's use of myth and history is done very differently from Divakaruni's who recreates her myths to give them a symbolic dimension.

All the characters in this story are unable to come to terms with themselves; they hide behind silences that threaten to break their relationship. Lahiri becomes the "namesake" in this collection, giving voices to the voiceless sufferers. She has stated in an interview given to Vibhuti Patel in *Newsweek International*: "The characters I'm drawn to all face some barrier of communication. I like to write about people who think in a way they can't fully express" (Patel 8). It has often been suggested that Lahiri, with her sorrowful, yet inspiring tales, is in fact herself and "interpreter of maladies". To this she responds: "That's the way it turned out, at the time [I wrote the stories] I wasn't aware of it" (Patel 8). Her protagonists, like her, may belong to the three continents, but what connects them with each other is the bond of humanity and unsung maladies.

"A Real Durwan" and "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" can be taken as the two sides of the coin of partition. But unlike Urvashi Butalia's book, *The Other Side of Silence* where she tells the stories of partition experience of women firsthand, these stories have a different focus. More than the trauma a part in the story of Boori Ma in "A Real Durwan" we get a sense of exile, of not belonging. She has literally been rendered homeless, a feeling Lahiri herself in a different way has experienced first-hand. She says in "A Conversation with Jhumpa Lahiri": "The older I get, the more aware am I that I have

somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents" ("A Conversation with JhumpaLahiri"). Boori Ma, a refuge from East Bengal, is now reduced to being the unofficial sweeper and durwan of multistoried building in Kolkata. As she sweeps the staircase, she narrates stories of her glorious past before Partition rendered her homeless and family — less. Her stories are hardly credible, considering that with each rendering they become more dramatic and her family more affluent: "Whether there was any truth to Boon Ma'slitanies no one could be sure. For one thing, every day, the parameters of her former estate seemed to double, as did the contents of her almerly and coffer boxes. No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear" (Interpreter of Maladies 71-72). Though she is the butt of much ridicule among the residents of the building, her construction of that past is interesting.

Memory becomes her only treasure; it is her only way of relieving herself of the monotony of her routine and her poverty. She has nothing to look forward to in her future. So she looks back into her past to get a sense. Of worth and a sense of belonging Memory of the happy past cushions her from the hardships of the present times. Jancy James suggests that the expatriate sensibility reaches out to its cultural moorings through many ways, one of them is nostalgia. (James 199).Boori Ma is perhaps not too different from Mrs. Sen in "Mrs. Sen.'s" who emphatically tells Eliot that everything is in India, her "home". The notion of exile is important here. For Buri Ma, the only exile in this collection who had not chosen to leave her country voluntarily, there is no way of going back to her country physically. The only way of revisiting her home that is left open to her country physically... The only way of revisiting her home that is left open to her is through her imagination. ManjuJaidka suggests that: "[...] the role that the imagination plays in the mind of the immigrant, that being exiled is a mental state. It is akin to Camus's Outsider, the feeling of being a misfit in a particular given, a reject, an outcaste" (Jaidka 13). Seen from much this angle it is perhaps not so surprising that nostalgia colours Boori Ma's home much brighter than it had been in reality. She is literally an outcaste in this story and towards the end of the story she is

mercilessly rendered homeless again, this time with not even a single paisa with her, yet still trying to make people believe in her stories about home: "From the pile of belongings BooriMa kept only her broom. 'Believe me, believe me,' she said once more as her figure began to recede. She shook the free and of her sari, but nothing [money] rattled" (Interpreter of Maladies 82). The story has undertones of Tagore's short story "PuratanBhritto" ("The Old Servant").

Lahiri is at her best in her understatement in this story as she describes the predicament of Buri Ma. Lahiri says in her interview with Vibhuti Patel: "I have inherited my parent's preoccupations. It's hard to have parents who consider another place 'home' — even after living abroad for thirty years, India is home for them. We were always looking back so I never felt fully at home here [America][...] we visited [India] often, but we didn't have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us" (Patel 8). ManjuSheth points out to this phenomenon in her documentary on Indian Americans. She suggests that though most second-generation immigrants consider America to be their "home", they keep considering India to be their "homeland" and feel a vague sense of dislocation in both the cultures. Thus most of her characters are haunted with a sense of not belonging though in most of her early stories in India. As she grew in confidence she began to set her stories in America, which she says have been much more challenging, because they are much closer to her own experiences. The distance from the homeland, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge and longing for a past world have been projected very subtly through Boori Ma.

In the story "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine", the venue shifts to Boston. The title of the story suggests a romantic dinner perhaps, but Mr. Pirzada finds in Lilia his young daughters who he had left at home in East Pakistan. The story strongly reminds us or Rabindranath Tagore's story "Kabuliwala" ("The Man from Kabul") and perhaps that story gives us a pointer towards understanding the strange bond that develops between Mr. Pirzada and young Lilia, who reminds Mr. Pirzada of his daughters. Lilia, a young second-generation Indian-American girl, is

the storyteller. She tries to make sense of the autumn of 1971, the year when East Pakistan was fighting for its freedom from Pakistan. Lilia feels a sense of distance from what is going on in the Indian sub-continent. Lahiri brings in very subtly the differences between Lilia's parents and Lilia, first and second generation immigrants, in their involvement towards their homeland. The on-going war has no immediate bearing on Lilia's life as it has for her parents and for Mr. Pirzada who desperately try to find out more about the war taking place so many thousands of

miles away from America. Lahiri's descriptions of the war sound very objective when compared to Divakaruni's descriptions of horror experienced firsthand by Mira in "The Blooming Season for Cacti".

In a Lahiri's story food is a very important cultural metaphor. It defines Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada's common shared cultural identity, even though they no longer belong to the same country. Lilia fails to understand these nuances of differences:

It made no sense to me. Mr. Pirzada and my parents spoke the same language, laughed at the same jokes, looked more or less the same... Nevertheless, my father insisted that I understand the difference, and he led me to the map. He seemed concerned that Mr. Pirzada might take offence if I accidentally referred to him as an Indian. (*Interpreter of Maladies* 25-26).

Food binds the people in the story. In the days of war, they had just rice, and boiled egg to show their sympathy for Mr. Pirzada. For Lilia also, eating those American candies that Mr. Pirzada used to bring her becomes a ritual, though true to her Western identity the candies are American. Religion also plays a certain role in defining the identities of Lilia, her parents and of Mr. Pirzada. Mr. Pirzada is a Muslim. That is why after partition he belonged to East Pakistan, while Lilia's parents are Hindus and thus, became Indians. Lilia, born and brought up in the United States of America, has somewhat adopted the religion of the new country Even if she is a Hindu technically, she does not know how to pray formally: "I had never prayed for anything before, had never been taught or told to, but I decided, given the circumstances, that it was

something I should do" (*Interpreter of Maladies* 32). She celebrates Christian traditions like Halloween and Christmas.

Lilia had visited India only once and has no memory of the place. She relates to Indian things by finding connections with their American counterparts, and that is only natural. Her grandmother's little box where she stores her American candies seems to be her only heritage from India. She has no stories from the grandmother to fall back on like Ruchira, a second-generation Indian in Divakaruni's "The Unknown Errors of our Lives". Like Shukumar in Lahiri's "Temporary Matter", Lilia too learns about India from maps and books. The writer very cleverly juxtaposes the myth of the great American War of Independence that Lilia is learning in school with the ongoing war of freedom that East Pakistan is fighting which none of her friends seems to know about.

Lilia finds it easier to gather information about the voyage on Mayflower that had happened so many years ago than the battle going on in her own country. W.E.B. Dubois speaks of "two-ness" of vision in his *The Souls of Black Folk*. This is something that most immigrants show. In this story food serves as a metaphor, a way of hanging on to their homelands by Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada, a something which provides them with stability and security and acts as a buffer against the turmoil in their homelands.

Food forms a central metaphor in "A Temporary Matter" too. The story poignantly brings out the gradual dissolution of the marriage between Shaba and Shukumar following the stillbirth of Shoba's first pregnancy. Shoba's zest for cooking indicates her zest for life. Her making elaborate recipes, altering recipes, shopping for them shows her enthusiasm for the life she has carved out with her husband Shukumar. The death of her child takes away that zest of life from her, as is indicated by her lack of interest in cooking. Shukumar takes over the cooking as an increasingly distracted and remote Shaba takes refuge in her job. But Shukumar feeling vaguely guilty that he had been away in an academic conference. When Shaba went into premature labour, is depressed. The couple hides behind silences and their relationship is much detonated

when the notice for temporary power cuts for five nights an hour each day. Shoba's suggestion that they tell each other something in the darkness that they have never told before becomes a turning point in their relationship. The darkness gives them a chance to open up in a way they had never managed to do before. They begin by telling each other little things. Something's are no more relevant today, yet they lighten their hearts. Shared memory frees them both from guilt pangs. Yet, both save the most important secret for the last day when there is no power cut: Shaba had found a new apartment and Shukumar had held their dead baby son in his arms. As the last bit of secret is wrenched out from them, they turn off the lights and both "[weep] together, for the things they now [know]" (*Interpreter of Maladies* 22).

Will the breaking of silence and sharing things closest to their hearts salvage the marriage? The writer deliberately keeps the ending open. She is only the faithful interpreter, not the provider of magic remedies. Perhaps their shared grief for the first time since the loss of the baby will bring them close or perhaps not. Memory forms a key component of the story, demarcating events in Shukumar and Shoba's minds as before or after the baby's death. Though the primary focus of this story is loss of their baby and the breakdown of communication between the couple as they are unable to share their grief, Lahiri has brought out the identity of the immigrants very subtly. Shukumar, like Lilia, has no memory of India first hand unlike Shoba who has been to India several times during her vacations. Shukumar regrets that unlike Shoba, he has no stories to tell about India, even though for his Ph.D. dissertation he has picked up some aspect of Indian agriculture. Shukumar compares his mother, a first generation Indian who had been totally dependent on her husband, with his independent wife. Yet, when the crisis comes, Shoba is perhaps no better equipped to handle it than her mother-in-law. Shoba's mother, on the other hand, projects the reserved and religious, ideal Indian woman, who keeps her distance from her son-in-law as demanded by tradition. Lahiri in this story again stresses the importance of food habits. Even though they are second-generation Indians, they retain their Indian food habits to great

extent. In this story there is interplay at various levels between the immigration experiences of the first and second-generation immigrants. In the interaction between the two cultures something is lost as well as gained.

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