TRAVELLING ACROSS CULTURES – JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES*

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The migrant has become one of the emblematic figures of the contemporary world. Travelling and adapting across cultures have turned into major issues and concerns of the contemporary globalizing envirnoment. Contemporary fiction attempts to offer possible solutions to the more than evident crisis of communication between cultures. It is through literature that many of the contemporary writers try to come to terms with their immigrant condition, to find a voice of their own by making the two worlds they are forced to live in coexist harmoniously within the very often traumatized self.

Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of stories *Interpreter of Maladies* is the result of the writer's "desire to force the two worlds I occupied to mingle on the page as I was not brave enough, or mature enough, to allow in life" (Lahiri, "My Two Lives"). The stories, set across national, but also generation, or gender frontiers, contribute to the writer's finally finding an identity of her own, reconciling her two selves as, "like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen" (Lahiri, "My Two Lives"). Consequently, the collection may be interpreted as the writer's journey into her new, even if not necessarily true, self, a journey of initiation into the major adaptation problems of the contemporary world. The writer's journey, partially recorded in her stories, evolves from the condition of the individual for whom "one plus one did not equal two but zero, my conflicting selves always cancelling each other out" to that of the individual finally aware that "one plus one equals two, both in my work and in my daily existence, [t]he traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell[ing] in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day" (Lahiri, "My Two Lives")

On a first reading, Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories seems to offer an image of the complicated cultural relationships between India and the West, investigating the troubled position of the displaced individual caught between two cultures which, in most cases, he/ she finds unfamiliar. On a second, more in-depth reading, all the stories record journeys across visible and invisible frontiers that the characters must transgress in order to find their real self.

The frontier itself requires a more nuanced interpretation. It is not only the visible, national, in particular, frontier, between cultures that people have to cross, but also the invisible frontiers which separate individuals belonging to one and the same culture. The frontier is "an elusive line, visible and invisible, physical and metaphorical, amoral and moral" (Rushdie 411) and the idea behind Lahiri's stories is that we all have to fight our share of frontier wars. Jhumpa Lahiri seems to fictionally agree that "[t]he journey creates us. We become the frontiers we cross" (Rushdie 410). And this is mainly because she herself, although born in London and then spending the rest of her life in the United States, was, however, born to Bengali Indian parents, which inevitably made her be looked at as an immigrant and "[t]he immigrant's journey, no matter how ultimately rewarding, is founded on departure and deprivation, [although] it secures for the subsequent generation a sense of arrival and advantage" (Lahiri, "My Two Lives").

It is primarily because of her origin that the critics were tempted to include *Interpreter of Maladies,* Lahiri's debut book, but also her subsequent productions, in the Asian American literature section and to approach it as a sample of Asian American writing. Yet, we consider that Lahiri's artistic intention is more specifically associated with her desire to move beyond the stereotypical image of Indianness and, through her writing, to find an identity and discover a voice able to help her overcome the stigma of marginality (Hoffman 268).

Out of the nine stories, three are set in India, whereas six are set in America, focusing on the lives of first or second generation Americans of Indian origin. According to Michiko Kakutani, "many of Ms. Lahiri's people are Indian immigrants trying to adjust to a new life in the United States, and their cultural displacement is a kind of index of a more existential sense of dislocation" (48).

Yet, apart from the setting of some of the stories and the clearly indicated origin of the protagonists of some other, Lahiri's collection seems to resist the stereotypes of Indianness and the clichés associated with the inevitable clash between the East and the West. The writer is more inclined to do away with prejudice and go beyond the stereotypical images that in most cases underlie and undermine these relationships. The encounter between the East and the West, the migration of individuals across national frontiers is nothing but a pretext for Lahiri to probe deep into the difficulties generated by the encounter between the self and the Other, into the condition of the troubled modern self and, more importantly, to investigate human nature. In this respect, Jhumpa Lahiri's writings develop along lines characteristic for most contemporary fiction, equally interested in the essence of the individual consciousness and in the self as the converging point of various cultural forces, considering both the private and the public spheres and the way in which they interact and influence each other.

Lahiri's stories explore human relations in a cultural context, but the writer's approach to culture seems to be in terms of the two possible paradigms, 'large', respectively 'small' culture. Culture is thus looked at both as the "large ethnic, national or international" entities and as "any cohesive social grouping with no necessary subordination to large cultures" (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 63). Therefore, none of the stories exclusively focuses on the encounter between the large cultures or on the one between and within the small cultures, but rather on the tension generated by the fact that individuals perforce evolve in both. Lahiri's characters seem to confirm that

> Dislocation is the norm rather than the aberration in our time, but even in the unlikely event that we spend an entire lifetime in one place, the fabulous diverseness with which we live reminds us constantly that we are no longer the norm and the centre […]. (Hoffman 275)

It is no longer and only the clash between national cultures that represents the writer's main interest, although some of Lahiri's protagonists do seem to conform to the typical image of the contemporary migrant, the individual "severed from his roots, often transplanted into a new language, always obliged to learn the ways of a new community […] forced to face the great questions of change and adaptation" (Rushdie 415). It is the case of the protagonist of 'The Third and Final Continent' who looks at himself from the very beginning as the typical migrant.

> I left India in 1964, with a certificate in commerce and the equivalent, in those days, of ten dollars to my name. […] I lived in north London, in Finsbury Park, in a house occupied entirely by penniless Bengali bachelors like myself, […] all struggling to educate and establish ourselves abroad. (173)

It is also the case of Mrs. Sen in 'Mrs. Sen's' or Shoba and Shukumar in 'A Temporary Matter'. Lahiri's attempt is to see beyond the visible frontiers and to plunge deeper into the springs of human action. That is why she frequently deals with problematic relationships between individuals within one and the same society, be it American or Indian. Many of her stories treat marriage and the tense relationships within couples.

"This Blessed House" focuses on the troubled relationships within the couple. "At the urging of their matchmakers, [Sanjeev and Twinkle] married in India, amid hundreds of well-wishers" (143) just to realize soon how different they are and how lonely they felt. Miranda, the protagonist of "Sexy" also feels insecure in the relationship she has with a married man, the

story being about her becoming aware of her displacement and loneliness. "A Temporary Matter" is about a couple growing estranged from each other after the death of their child and how they "become experts at avoiding each other in their three-bedroom house, spending as much time on separate floors as possible" (4).

"A Temporary Matter" is fully set in America, but Shoba and Shukumar are of Indian origin. The story is far from analyzing their inability to adapt to a hostile cultural environment. It rather focuses on the deteriorating relationships between a husband and a wife after the death of their child and, although the two would be expected to stick together given the tragic incident and the threatening cultural environment, the walls separating the young couple become even thicker in spite of their common origin. They find it impossible to communicate and get estranged to the point of separating.

"A Real Durwan" is set in India and features only characters whose origin is not commented on since they are natives in their own country. The protagonist of the story is a sixty-year-old woman, deported to Calcutta as a result of the Partition, whose problems of adaptability to a new culture are brought to the fore. "No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear" (72), which is why she is always inclined "to exaggerate her past at such elaborate lengths and heights" (73) in order to protect herself against the aggressiveness of the new cultural environment. From the point of view of the Westerner inclined to prejudice and stereotyping, the story might be read as focusing on the cruelty of the Indians and their indifference to the Other, since Boori Ma, accused of theft by those whom she had served for years in exchange for a shelter, is cruelly thrown into the street. Yet, if one forgets that the story's setting is Calcutta, one realizes that the story is about failed human relationships, about indifference and cruelty caused by poverty.

Out of the nine stories, one seems to have a more accentuated political content, in the sense that, because of an explicit reference to the Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971, the reader is tempted to see it as dealing with contemporary political issues.

> [Mr. Pirzada] came from Dacca, now the capital of Bangladesh, but then [1971] a part of Pakistan. That year Pakistan was engaged in civil war. The eastern frontier, where Dacca was located, was fighting for autonomy from the ruling regime in the west. (23)

The story, however, narrated from the point of view of the child Lilia, definitely resists politicizing, bringing to the fore instead issues related to identity and intercultural communication. It is the child's way of perceiving the world and her consciousness that represents the story's main

interest. Lilia is the one whose initiation depends on her becoming aware of the difference between the self and the other across the visible and the invisible frontiers.

> Like my parents, Mr. Pirzada took off his shoes before entering a room, […] drank no alcohol […]. Nevertheless my father insisted that I understand the difference and he led me to a map of the world taped to the wall over his desk. […] "Mr. Pirzada is Bengali, but he is Muslim," my father informed me. "Therefore he lives in East Pakistan, not India." (26)

Yet, although Lahiri's work may be interpreted as essentially focusing on the problems of immigrants, "her real subject is miscommunication. The relationships in her stories are a series of missed connections" (Brians 196). It is not so much the visible frontiers that the writer seems to be obsessed with as the invisible ones that do tend to keep people apart. The individual in Lahiri's stories is not simply Indian or American, Indian in America, or Indian in India, or American of Indian origin in India. The individual is rather the locus of much more complicated cultural relations and tensions. Culture, therefore, for Lahiri, is not understood in an essentialist manner, as national culture, homogeneous and unitary, but as

> a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations. (Holliday, Hyde, Kullman 3)

The cultural clash is central to Lahiri's stories. Its treatment is not limited, however, to the encounter between India and America, but the clash can occur on both sides of the frontier. "Interpreter of Maladies", the collection's title story, deals with the encounter between an Indian cabdriver and tour guide, also a gifted linguist, Mr. Kapasi and an Indian American family touring India. The Dases are perceived by Mr. Kapasi from the start as foreigners as they "looked Indian, but dressed as foreigners did" (44). During their first encounter, Mr. Das has an air of confidence given by the fact that "Mina and I were both born in America" (45). The Das family cannot be mistaken for Indian, although they do look so. They are and behave American. Mr. Das cannot do without his tour book, which provides the information he thinks he needs to acquire knowledge of India. What stirs his curiosity is the exoticism of the people and places in India. The Das family's encounter with India is an example of failed intercultural communication. Mr. and Mrs. Das do not try to recover a sense of belonging, but they are rather keen on reasserting their identity as Americans. Yet,

during the trip they take to the Sun Temple in Konarak, Mr. Kapasi feels he identifies with Mrs. Das. He sees in her the same unhappiness he felt about his own marriage. "The signs he recognized from his own marriage were there – the bickering, the indifference, the protracted silences" (53). But communication is hindered again, as Mr. Kapasi was looking for a friend, while Mrs. Das was looking for someone to "interpret her common, trivial little secret," (66) which is why he felt deeply insulted. Mrs. Das misinterpreted 'the interpreter of maladies.' She wanted some remedy to cure her consciousness, expecting to feel better and relieved. Mr. Kapasi wanted instead to "fulfill his dream, of serving as an interpreter between nations." (59)

Because of the subject matter of the stories, it is rather difficult to find a common denominator to keep the collection together. Apparently, the only binding element is Indianness. But to say that Lahiri's main concern is the status of the Indian immigrant in America, or at best, the precarious condition of the Indians in India would mean to over-simplify and ignore many of the issues from which much of the artistic vigour of Lahiri's stories is derived. Critics themselves found it difficult to produce a consistent evaluation of Lahiri's stories and to unerringly identify the writer's position to the Indian or American community.

> Ever since *Interpreter of Maladies* was published, she has been variously proclaimed to be an "American writer," an "Indian-American author," an "NRI" (non-residential Indian), and an "ABCD" (American born confused desi). Her writings are described as "diaspora fiction" by Indian scholars and "immigrant fiction" by American critics. (Shuchen 126)

It is just by overcoming our tendency to label and to see and interpret the world in black and white that we are able to read Lahiri's stories as what they really are – an insight into the essentials of life, but also an investigation of the condition of the individual in the contemporary world. According to Brada Williams,

> […] a deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together, including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect.

Lahiri's stories bring to the fore issues related to intercultural communication, the cultural clash, stereotyping and otherizing, and see all these problems as having to do with human nature rather than being strictly

associated with the condition of the immigrant or Indianness. "[The] nine stories have in common certain themes and motifs, such as exile, displacement, loneliness, difficult relationships, and problems about communication" (Shuchen 126). Essentially, Lahiri's stories deal with the encounter between self and other, individual identity being in most cases the result of a mirroring effect. Although ethnicity seems to be central to all the stories, Lahiri is too little interested in ethnic aspects and Indianness is seldom, if ever, exaggerated. She resorts to India either as the setting of her stories or as place or cultural set of customs and beliefs most characters refer themselves to in order to define their identity. The stories also feature characters that are either Indian or Indian American. Yet, what Lahiri tries to avoid is the exoticism associated in the mind of the Westerners with either the locale or the people. She rather investigates and draws attention to problems of more general human interest that have nothing to do with India or being Indian either in India or America.

The stories may be considered equally heterogeneous if analysed in terms of the narrative technique employed. Two of the stories "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" and "The Third and Final Continent" are first-person narratives. The former is narrated from the point of view of a ten-year child, the latter from the perspective of an Indian émigré in America. The rest are third-person narratives, but the story is filtered through the consciousness and sensibility of a more or less involved character. It would be difficult to say whether Lahiri's choice of method has anything to do with a certain pattern she has intended for the stories. But the effect she has obtained is a kaleidoscopic one. The reader is offered the possibility to look at the issues the stories deal with from various angles, although we cannot speak about a multiple point of view narrative.

> "I like it [language] to be plain. It appeals to me more. There's form and there's function and I have never been a fan of just form. Even now in my own work, I just want to get it *less*—get it plainer. When I rework things I try to get it as simple as I can." (Chotiner)

Interpreter of Maladies attempts to offer an interpretation of the maladies of the contemporary society and of the individual inevitably caught between here and there and yet belonging neither here nor there. Just like Mr. Kapasi, Lahiri would like to serve "as an interpreter between nations" (59), but mainly as an interpreter for the modern individual's anxieties and torment.

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