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Book Review

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Clothing of Books*, Penguin, 2017 (71 pages) Price Rs. 199.

"The cover is superficial, negligible, irrelevant with respect to the book. The cover is an essential, vital component of the book. One must accept the fact that both these sentences are true." (18)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Clothing of Books* is a short non-fictional prose work where she delves into the politics of the book covers. The relationship between the cover of a book and what lies within the cover is often a matter of concern not only for the writer, but also the publisher as well as the readers. The author tries to put a cover which puts forward the spirit and the content of the book, whereas the publisher wants a cover which will make the book sell well and the readers judge a book initially by its cover before s/he engages himself or herself in reading the book. Thus covers of books are equally, if not more, important for a book. Jhumpa Lahiri therefore engages herself in a discussion of the cover of books in *The Clothing of Books*.

Through the cover of books, Lahiri engages herself into a discussion of literary analysis of texts, not only her own, but also the books that she encountered in her life. It is extremely significant to understand here that while picking up a book to read our first impulse of picking up, of selection of a book is often decided by the cover of the book. It is true that we often read a book because it is a popular one, or from a writer of fame; but often when we go through a book stall to randomly pick up a book to read or to gift, we choose a book by the cover – by cover I not only mean the pictures that are there in the cover, but also the information that the cover has.

The question is – what is there in the cover of a book? – the name of the book, name of the author, the name of the publisher in the front cover and in the back cover, some details of the book so as to arouse interest, some details often of the author, sometimes quotes of what famous people or reviews have to say about the book, the details of the publishing house, the ISBN no and the price of the book. These facts mentioned in the book cover more or less often decide whether we choose to buy a book or not. Therefore publishers very often engage themselves in an intense research to provide the apt cover to a book so as to market the book in a desirable manner. Therefore Lahiri states that a

book cover "transforms the text into an object, something concrete to publish, distribute and, in the end, sell." (14)

Lahiri starts the book by an analogy of her diasporic existence. She narrates how when she used to visit her hometown Kolkata during her holidays the school uniforms of her cousins used to entice her. In America, there is no school uniform and therefore kids dress each day carefully in fashionable clothes to go to school, whereas in Kolkata, because of an uniform, distinct for every school, how all kids wears the same clothing almost. Lahiri thus starts the book with an analogy between uniform and book covers. In the first chapter "The Charm of the Uniform", Lahiri makes it clear to the readers how distinct book covers is something that she hasn't yet got accustomed to even after writing and publishing so many best sellers. She writes –

"When my books were first published when I was thirty-two years old, I discovered that another part of me had to be dressed and presented to the world. But what was wrapped around my words – my book covers – is not of my choosing.



I am forced, at times, to accept book jackets that I dislike, that I find problematic, disappointing. I tend to give in. I say to myself, Let it go, it's not worth the battle. But I end up feeling afflicted, resentful." (10)

In the very first chapter of the book, she makes it clear how she has a strong dislike for the book covers that publishers force on her and she merely accepts them. her affliction for such covers stems from the fact that during her school days she was always tiraded by her class mates for not being 'fashioned' according to the time and therefore "the other" – throughout her young life, she, being a diasporic child, struggled to keep up with the clash of cultures that is manifest in the dressing. It is this insistence on the notion of 'proper fashionable dressing' that has made her being resentful in her childhood and now when she is a well-acclaimed writer throughout the world, she is resentful about the jackets of her books as similar to her dresses being dictated by terms of fashion in her childhood, her book jackets are dictated by the demands of the publishers.

She also makes a comparison between the cover of a book with translation. When one engages oneself with the issue of translation, the first thing that comes to the forefront is whether a translated text is faithful to its original. She writes –

"Like a translation, a cover can be faithful to the book, or it can be misleading. In theory, like a translation, it should be in the service of the book, but this dynamic isn't always the case. A cover can be overbearing, dominating." (17 -18)

Few issues Lahiri takes up through this analogy of translation are – (a) Translation is faithful to the original text similar to the Cover being faithful to the book – faithfulness being a supposedly feminine virtue where a cover needs to be faithful to the words within, (b) when the cover is not faithful, it is "overbearing, dominating" and in such cases the cover mars the words within the book. The question is can and should the cover always be faithful to the book. Lahiri writes – "The cover confers on a book not one identity but two. It introduces an expressive element distinct from that of the text. There is what the text says, and what the cover says. That is why one can love the cover and hate the book, or vice-versa." (21) The question is does the cover of the book always have to speak what the book intends or tries to say. In this context, it is to be remembered that the author and the artist who makes the cover are two different individuals and their way of looking at things are not the same always. Sometimes the artist who makes the cover of the book hasn't at all read the book, but heard about the content of the book from some source which is nothing but an interpretation of the book. And like all interpretations, covers are misreadings, sometimes they are justified misreading and sometimes they are the bad ones. It is what makes Lahiri have distrust for the cover of the books.

Like her dresses in her youth which was often mocked at because of her diasporic existence, Lahiri feels that the cover of her books do not present what the books are. So she loves the idea of "naked books" – the books which are without the pretense of the covers. But mentioning her own books and their covers, Lahiri says –

"My books tell stories, but what stories, meanwhile, do my covers tell? Upon close inspection, my covers tend perfectly to mirror my own double identity, bifurcated, disputed. As a result they are often projections, conjectures." (49)

Jhumpa Lahiri is this lucky with her books that their covers perfectly portray her own spirit, the spirit of her books, the essence of her existence. She says – "All my life I have been in conflict between two different identities, both imposed." (49) One of her identity is that of her Americanized life where she was bought up and the other is that of homeland (Kolkata) – an identity that her mother tried hard to impose on her. She says that she is "caught in the same trap" (50) as her book covers. There is no way out for her

from this dual “imposed” identities – the publishers try to sell these dual identities in the cover of her books, but often they fall into stereotyping – sometimes making things too “oriental” or sometimes makes a American flag in the book cover to assert the American identity. And one has to keep in mind that it is not that it is just a cover of a book, as she is being translated into many languages and for each of those translations there are different book jackets. And interestingly all these different jackets hold the supposedly same stories – “How is it possible that one book, the same book, can generate this panorama of images?” (52) asks Lahiri. She, for example, discusses her book *In Other Words (In Altre Parole)* and its different translations. The English translation has a picture of the author in a library in Rome, whereas the French translation has no image at all. The first reaction of the English Translated book Cover of Lahiri was that the public will think it “as an act of vanity, a brazen way to market a niche book” but the publishers felt that the book conveys “the personal and introspective nature of the book.” (56). Though Lahiri’s initial reactions were in negative, but like always she accepted it even though with some resentment. The book *The Clothing of Books* has no image in the cover – just the name of the author and the name of the book in front cover – and yet it is appealing as the title itself makes the book interesting to pick up and read. The back cover of the book states “If the process of writing is a dream, the book cover represents the awakening.” It is true as soon as the book gets a cover, it is meant for the public – it is meant for consumption and there the author is ceases to exist – the “author is dead” – awakened from the dream process of writing to the reality of his or her words being a series of words dressed in a clothing to be marketed, distributed and sold to anyone and everyone.



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