

The Linguistic “Otherness” of a Diaspora: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words*

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“The concepts of exile and return imply a point of origin, a homeland. Without a homeland and without a true mother tongue, I wander the world, even at my desk. In the end I realize that it wasn’t a true exile: far from it. I am exiled even from the definition of exile.” (Lahiri, *In Other Words*, 124)

Jhumpa Lahiri was born and brought up in a diasporic condition which moulded her consciousness and sensibilities in such a way that when she shared those sensibilities in her writings, acclaim poured in from different corners of the world and her writings were translated into different language across the world. She is one of the most widely read authors of the world. Whereas her fictional works are all imaginative and present the diasporic sensibilities, her recent work, *In Other Words*, is an unusual kind of a work, her ‘linguistic autobiography’ of a kind which deals primarily with her journey of learning Italian Language to her writing the book in Italian – a journey from 1994 to 2015 – a journey that significantly celebrates her accomplishments as well as her vulnerabilities in acquiring the Italian language. In writing the book, she is resisting the popular canon of the diaspora. She presents how her sensibilities are not merely diasporic but often she figures herself to be exiled “even from the definition of exile.” Beena Agarwal in her “Introduction” to *Women Writers and Indian Diaspora* states about women diasporic writers that –

Cultural ideologies are gender specific and women predicament in a state of cultural geographical shift generates a complex pattern of feminine mystique. The distinction arises out the three components (a) the realization of inferiority as a woman, (b) realization of insecurity for their inaccessibility to western cultural values and (c) the strong bonding with national cultural identity coupled with the exceptional sensibility for personal relationship. (3)

But Jhumpa Lahiri in *In Other Words* transgresses the 'supposed' women's predicament in the diasporic set up to offer to the world her own adjustments and accomplishments as she learns the Italian language.

She feels exilic at her desk as she attempts to learn and write in Italian even though she wanders throughout the world. Her exilic condition finds its greatest manifestation in her leaning a foreign tongue. Such kind of a narrative of one's linguistic motivation through the metaphor of life and exile has never been attempted before. One of its kinds, the non-fictional work, *In Other Words*, breaks many boundaries – of language learning, of the notion of supposedly 'foreign' language, of linguistic bondage, of language and its relation to homeland, of the difficulties of motivation in language learning, of success as well as lacunas of a second/ third language learner, of exile, of diaspora. Apparently, it may seem that the non-fictional work is just an attempt at the valorization of learning a foreign language; but reading it critically makes scholars realize that the work is a deeply rooted cultural critique resisting the canon of diaspora as it is popularly gauged and understood by people.

Known to the world for portraying the diasporic sensibilities to the forefront, Jhumpa Lahiri came to limelight with her first book *Interpreter of Maladies* (...), she continued to receive the attention of fiction readers across the world for her next four novels written one after another with adequate intervals. Her mesmerizing character analysis in the context of diaspora brought her not only fame but many literary awards and her novels became bestsellers. *In Other Words* is her first attempt in the mode of non-fictional prose, that too in a language in which her usual writing does not come to her readers. Written in Italian, *In Other Words*, attempts to be a 'linguistic autobiography' where she traces her early attempts at mastering Italian words through dictionaries and private mentors to her sailing to write this book. In her book *The Clothing of Books*, she refers to *In altre parole* (*In Other Words*) and says that "it is a meditative book, autobiographical, without much of a setting." (*The Clothing of Books*, 55) The book may be without a setting as the author wants to put it, yet the exilic condition of the author, her diasporic sensibilities as an exile is mirrored throughout the non-fictional work. She uses a brilliant analogy of a lake to talk about her venture in the Italian language in *In Other Words* –

"I want to cross a lake. It is really small, and yet the other shore seems too far away, beyond my abilities. I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support. That lake I'm talking about is in a secluded

isolated place. To get there you have to walk a short distance, through a silent wood. On the other side, you can see a cottage, the only house on the shore. The lake was formed just after the last ice age, millennia ago. The water is clear but dark, heavier than salt water, with no current. Once you're in, a few yards from the shore, you can no longer see the bottom." (3)

Crossing the lake is a metaphor that runs through the book in the context of language learning. Initially, she has extreme difficulty in swimming through the lake; but her constant endeavours make it a constructive affair as she not only is able to use the language for her creative purposes; but also to realize some aspects of her own being – it makes her realize how she is far too away and in exile even from the concept of the exile. Learning a second language and living in a diasporic setting has close resemblances as in both the contexts one needs deep attitudinal and altitudinal force to get accustomed to the new setting and culture. They are like crossing the lake where one finds oneself to be 'afraid of being alone ... without any support' but soon with one's efforts finds oneself in a place where one can 'no longer see the bottom' of the lake and yet one keeps on moving/ swimming to reach the shore – to be alive, to reach the cottage on the other side – so as to survive. The survival instinct makes one gather the strength to be alive and to learn the new language.

It is in and through language that we construct our world, our identity, our sense of belongingness – it is through and in language that diasporic sensibilities are experienced and lived – it is in language and through it that an individual finds himself/herself to be an alien / or an insider to any country/community. The sense of belongingness becomes stronger because of one's competence in one's language(s).

Jhumpa Lahiri is born in a Bengali family; therefore by birth, she belongs to the Bengali speech community. Lahiri's mother's constant endeavors keep her in touch with Bengali language and culture, but her being brought up in England and America made her naturally inclined to English language and which was her medium of creative endeavours till she writes *In Other Words*. Whereas Bengali and English can be termed as natural linguistic selections of Lahiri; Italian was an emotional and intellectual linguistic choice as she got interested in learning Italian when she was engrossed in her research work in the University. But now that she has moved to Italy and is deeply engaged in learning the Italian language and writing in it, she makes a resolve to herself that she will not return to English Language for her creative endeavours, as she says – "I consider it an official renunciation. I'm about to become a linguistic pilgrim to Rome.

I believe I have to leave behind something familiar, essential.” (38) She leaves behind her “English” and as a result gets such a mastery over Italian that creative writing in Italian becomes a cakewalk for her.

Instead of getting into the ‘whys’ of her linguistic choice let us delve into her realization in her attempts to choose to learn Italian language and her realization becomes a deeper and greater one as she pens down the book. The title of the book *In Other Words* is interestingly chosen as the word ‘Other’ signifies many facets – she as ‘the other’ (both in terms of gender as well as a supposed diasporic individual in a different nation); ‘other’ as in the ‘second language’ that she chooses to acquire; ‘other’s as in the different than the usual; ‘other’ as in she being in Italy as an outsider, in exile.

Predominantly, Lahiri’s consciousness works around two significant motifs – creativity and exile. She herself mentions in the book –

“If I want to understand what moves me, what confuses me, what pains me – everything that makes me react, in short – I have to put it into words. Writing is my only way of absorbing and organizing life. Otherwise, it would terrify me; it would upset me too much.” (83)

So writing, *In Other Words*, was necessary for her to organize her own learning experience, to provide it with a final cosmetic cover in terms of narrating her experiments in learning an ‘other’ language.

But at the same time, learning a second language is always going to be learning to deal with imperfections. As one carries on learning the language more and more imperfections start creeping in making one conscious of them – asserting and yet at the same time questioning the sensibilities of the learner. It is in language that we construct our world. As Jhumpa Lahiri carries on perfecting her Italian in order to swim across the beautiful lake that she herself had described in the beginning of the book, she experiences her imperfections which she tries to deal with through writing.

Writing, therefore, becomes the process through which Lahiri attempts to deal with her engagement with the Italian language. A significant question arises – why to write for public consumption about the language learning process and its outcome. Why would the readers be interested in knowing about Lahiri’s engagement with the Italian language? These questions too are being answered by Lahiri in her book as she states

that similar to the language learning process, a book too is 'imperfect, incomplete' during the process of its writing and then it takes shape towards its final form (sometimes probably also looking to some kind of perfection).

Though Lahiri is of the opinion that the book dies for her as soon as it is in public domain – because the growth of the book is not anymore in the author's domain; but in the readers who read / reread/ misread the book in the fashion that they choose which cannot be controlled by the author anymore. The book is dead for Lahiri as the author is dead when the book reaches the hands of the readers. Similar to communication cycle, the receiver decodes and responds to the book in her/his own way, depending on the context from which she/he is reading the book.

As the book is 'alive' during the period of its creation, gestation and growth, similarly a language too is only alive when there are speakers of that language who use it for their communicative needs. Lahiri's learning of Italian language is not only a moment of growth for herself, but also for the language as any and every individual is 'creative' in her/his own way in using the language. Lahiri, being one of the most creative personalities of our times, obviously makes a significant contribution into the Italian language.

Moreover, through her learning of Italian language and by writing, *In Other Words*, she resists the contrapuntal forces that fashions a diasporic – the pull of the homeland and the push of the nation, language and culture of the land in which one is trying to absorb oneself. Lahiri presents how as a diasporic, she has no mother tongue in that sense as she is far from it emotionally and intellectually and how her intellectual endeavour in learning the Italian language made her achieve newer dimensions of her exilic condition which makes Supriya Bhandari say that "Lahiri's forte lies in depicting the overpowering feeling of otherness in an alien culture." (85)

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