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Grappling the Invisible Roots, Nostalgia, Identity, Home and Nation in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* - an Interpretation of Imagery and Symbolism

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Abstract

Mass immigration is now a part and parcel of globalization in the post-colonial era due to existential as well as non-existential reasons. Some migrate for uplifting their economic conditions while some others for intellectual pursuits; in any case this has now become the way of the world and the accepted norm in the present times. On the one hand it has given a booster to man's living and luxury on the other it has mushroomed a plenty of allied strife's and struggles in the migrants' lives like they cross geographical borders to create new history. In the bargain they are forced to embrace the new challenges like loss of identity, cultural dilemma, a constant yearning to search for the invisible and imaginary roots unwillingly. Many diasporic writers have discussed these problems; Jhumpa Lahiri, a second-generation immigrant has dealt with the same in greater depths.

Keywords- *Immigration, Globalization, Existential, Mushroomed, Diasporic, Uplifting*

Introduction

In her debut collection of short stories, 'Interpreter of Maladies' which won Pulitzer Award is replete with these sufferings of the immigrants. In stories like 'When Mr. Pirzada came to dine', Mrs. Sen's, 'The Third and the Final continent' the author has deftly brought out the aspects of nation, roots, nostalgia, identity and so on through the employment of the literary technique of 'imagery'. Through these she efficiently communicates their maladies to the readers and enhances her special narrating skills. She focusses on the Indian immigrants who have taken a bold step to enter the 'Third

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World' booming in all its resplendence especially in materialism. The present paper will focus upon the aspects of imagery and the role they lay in bringing out the above-mentioned woes faced by the migrants' in their day to day lives.

Nostalgia and nation

In her second story, 'When Mr. Pirzada came to Dine' Jhumpa Lahiri, gives broader perspective of the political aspects, she brings into picture the anxieties of the character Mr. Pirzada who has migrated from East Pakistan with a government grant to do research on foliage of New England. After gathering data from Vermont and Maine in spring and summer he moves to a university north of Boston in autumn. He has migrated from Dacca in East Pakistan leaving behind his family of seven daughters which became the main cause of his nostalgia and also the war brewing up in his country. Lilia who is the narrator of the story has no clue about the geography of India and also its history. The common link of Lilia's parents and Mr. Pirzada's geography brought them close to each other since they shared similar lifestyle in many ways like their food habits, drinking tea and so on. Mr. Pirzada visited them very often that Lilia was able to observe his day to day activities closely.

Jhumpa Lahiri has connected the aspect of time and space in a symbolic manner to denote its interrelatedness. AS the post -colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha puts it in one of his works that 'Time and space are inter-related'. 'History unfolds itself through constructions of space'. In this short story she brings the 'plain silver watch without a band which he kept in his breast pocket'. Apart from the wrist watch he was wearing this special watch is wound three times with the help of his thumb and forefinger and the time set is that of Dacca roughly eleven hours ahead of the American time. On the one hand this denotes a deep sense of nostalgia that Mr. Pirzada dwells mentally with his family during dinner time. The fact that he doesn't consult that pocket watch that there is a 'time-lag' between the two countries; it is just that he tries to 'feel at home' in a 'homeless' condition. The symbol of this pocket watch rested on the coffee table without being consulted perhaps may be an indication of an attempt to bridge the gap between 'Home, the culture of origin and 'world' the culture of adoption.

Yet another imagery which indicates Mr. Pirzada's sense of alienation is the television which again like the pocket watch serves as a link with his family and country. Exactly at six-thirty after all adjustments made in the antenna he would watch the news more so because war was brewing up for the partition keenly. Without taking his eyes off the screen "an immovable expression on his face, composed but alert, as if someone were going to give him directions to an unknown destination".

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(Lahiri: 1999:31). This is an indication that Mr. Pirzada is mentally absent with Lilia and her parents and whatever images which he views in the T. V. screen ‘flashed as a miniature across his eyes’ as the author puts it.

Routing the maps of America, India and East Pakistan Jhumpa Lahiri takes the readers on a tour trying to make them visualise the geographical distances among the three countries through the mind’s eye. This symbol ‘maps’ denotes the technique of bridging the gap of the ‘orient and the ‘occident’. She also includes the historical aspect by bringing the past into picture; the time frame of 1971 and the present as a highlighter. Her treatment of the theme of nostalgia giving it a socio-political touch is not only a link of history but also geography transpiring the readers around the world; an amazing narrative technique.

Nostalgia and home

Mrs. Sen’s abounds in a plenty of imagery which draws the diasporic sensibilities like alienation, lack of sense of belonging in the host country, failure to get adjusted in her present situation are some discussed in this short story. Due to her marriage with Mr. Sen she left India, her native and started her new life in America. To her dismay she found that she was a total misfit in host country and constantly yearned to get back to India heart of hearts. Her dwelling reflected a miniature of India in many a way. Here again Jhumpa Lahiri has used symbols to bring out Mrs. Sen’s psychological trauma to the readers.

Mrs. Sen ventures to take up baby-sitting of Eliot, an eleven year old boy without having driving skills which is mandatory in America. It is her loneliness which made her take the decision since her husband, a mathematics professor in the university; moreover, she was childless adding to her woes of loneliness. Eliot’s mother decided to leave him after school hours to suit to the convenience of Mrs. Sen till she gets her driving license in December. She looks around Mrs. Sen’s apartments when she interviews her to find out her experiences as a baby-sitter.

The imagery of the lobby brings out a picture of a dead-lock and a static nature of the things around. The author puts it this way, “Inside intersecting shadows left by a vacuum cleaner were frozen on the surface of a plush pear-coloured carpet.” (Lahiri: 1999:112). Now the word ‘frozen’ symbolises a stoic quality which rather indicates Mrs. Sen’s mental status which is frozen by time. Perhaps it shows that Mrs. Sen is caught up in a ‘time-warp’ of her past and is unable to adapt to her present lifestyle. The white drum shaped lampshades on the sides of the sofas ‘still wrapped in the manufacturer’s plastic’ denotes a sense of no movement or change in Mrs. Sen’s attitude in life. This

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sense is portrayed by the author this way “She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not”, when Eliot’s mother mentioned about India. (Lahiri: 1999:113). An analogy which can be applied to Mrs. Sen.

The cutting blade which Mrs. Sen used for chopping vegetables is yet another symbol which makes the readers understand her native fervour and her resistance to adapt to the new; here the reference is that of a knife. The author compares her blade to that of ‘the prow of a Viking ship sailing to battle in distant seas’. She tries to recreate a mini Indian kitchen in America.

‘Fish’ is another symbol of Mrs. Sen’s native fervour. Though there are many varieties of fish available she prefers a special variety called ‘bhetki’ to prepare croquette. When she serves tuna croquette to Eliot’s mother she says, “It’s very frustrating”, “To live so close to the ocean and not to have much fish”. (Lahiri: 1999:123).

Last but not the least, Mrs. Sen’s failure to learn car driving symbolises her hatred to adapt to the western ways of living. She shrieks, ‘I hate it. I hate driving. I won’t go on.’ when she is unable to manage the traffic. She is helpless and fails miserably in her attempt to drive is highlighted in the end.

All these symbols pave the way perhaps to the ideology of ‘unhomeliness’ in her present in the host country and the static images may be a representation of the missing ‘feel at home’ factor and her longing to get back to her roots, Calcutta. Referring to this complex formation of diasporic sensibility Vijay Mishra remarks;

Diasporas connect themselves with the idea of the homeland or ‘desh’ against which other lands are foreign or ‘videsh’ and carry their homelands in the forms of a series of objects and fragments of narratives and memories in their heads or in their suitcases. (Mishra, 1996:67-68)

Loss of identity and roots

Jhumpa Lahiri’s last story of the text, ‘The third and the Final continent wraps up with another type of interesting analogy. The story is narrated in first person in which the narrator has travelled across the globe; from India to England in the year 1962 in a ship called S. S. Roma with a basic degree to explore his betterment of his economics. After some years he travels to Boston for greener pastures as a full-time librarian job in Boston in the year 1969.

The narrator is already out of his native for quite some time and his migration to America is again a new land to get accustomed to. He has taken this plight of his in his own stride and stays there

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for a very long period of thirty years with his wife and son. His son is now in college and he visits his parents now and then to revive the Bengali culture of eating rice with fingers and speaking his native tongue to keep it alive.

The relevance of the year 1969, the year man set his foot on the moon is the symbol which is employed here to make a comparison with the 'conquest' of living in the 'Third World'. When his son gets disheartened he gives him encouragement. He says like the astronauts who set their foot on the moon and hoisted the American flag; also spent some few hours on the moon. Likewise, living in America for thirty long years is no less of an achievement. Perhaps the author tries to interpret to her readers that the conquest of space is as good as the time spent and the experiences which cannot be undermined.

Conclusion

In all the three stories Jhumpa Lahiri has brought the relationship between time and space. She has played with the use of these symbols to embellish her narrative techniques as well as portray the diasporic characteristics like the image of home, nostalgia, roots and national identity skilfully. The 'modus operandi' she has explored by using these symbols and images adorns her narrative ability to incorporate the diasporic sensibilities in a unique manner.

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