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Lead Article

Jhumpa Lahiri
An Interpreter of Exile

Born to Indian parents and brought up largely in America, Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other, encountered but not necessarily assimilated,
says Aruti Nayar.

THE storyteller's art is perhaps as old as creation itself. Down the ages, stories have travelled in varied shapes and forms, without ever losing their perennial appeal or abiding interest. Now whether the sources lie in the epics such as *Mahabharat,* and texts like, *Upanishads, Puranas, Bible, Panchantra* or *The Arabian Nights* and the form is that of the parables, fables, Jatak tales, folk tales etc and the transmission is either through an old grandmother or a young Scheherazade warding off the threat of death, the appeal of the story cuts across all cultures and climes.

Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories—*Interpreter of Maladies*—is a throwback to this ancient art of story telling, ably nourished by the great masters. Born to Indian parents and brought up largely in America, Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other, encountered but not necessarily assimilated. It's hardly a surprise that her first-ever collection has won her the prestigious Pulitzer, and she is the first American of Indian origin to have done so.

Unlike the landscape artist with an imposing canvas and sweeping bold strokes, a short story writer is a miniaturist. Her strokes have to be precise, deft and intricate. Seemingly trivial and insignificant details often have to be brought into focus to create an overall impact that adds up to a perfect whole.

Like a true miniaturist, Lahiri straddles the two worlds represented by Boston and Bengal with skilful ease, bringing out their distinctive flavours. So understated, muted is her manner and style and so sharply defined her characterisation that the reader hardly feels he is reading a story.

Stories with a flavour so varied are written with an endearing, disarming simplicity. There is nothing superimposed or overlaid about the manner in which the cultural dislocation is interwoven within the narratives. Jhumpa Lahiri's success lies in the fact that she has emerged as an interpreter of exile in its varying nuances and manifestations.

Amply defined as *Gharib-ul-watani* in Persian, exile by its very nature incorporates an in-built diffidence, even ambivalence. The sense of not

belonging and the consequent dislocation is not merely a physical or geographical fact. Inherent in the situation is the essential cultural dilemma that this presupposes. As a writer, especially someone who is both finely tuned and sensitive, is often more alive to such nuances, this predicament can affect her all the more.

Despite the fact that the second generation of immigrants doesn't ordinarily face the travails of the preceding generation, ambiguities continue to dog various aspects of their lives. As Lahiri herself recounts in an interview: "I've inherited my parents' preoccupations. It's hard to have parents who consider another place their home even after 30 years."

These notions of belonging or home and the resulting dilemmas of dislocation or pre-occupations present themselves in a subtle, almost unobtrusive manner. An 11- year- old Lillia, the young protagonist of *When Mr Pirzada Came to Dine,* is intrigued by the visitor whose watch is set to Dacca time. In search of compatriots, her parents "used to trail their fingers at the start of each new semester, through the columns of the university directory, circling surnames familiar to their part of the world." Blissfully unaware of the significance of the 1971 war between India and Pakistan, she is equally oblivious of the differences between a Bengali Muslim and a Hindu. American history and geography are the only things that constitute her world. Filling in the names, dates, capitals in the maps of 13 colonies, she couldn't have even imagined how the intrigues or catastrophes thousands of miles away could affect her parents.

Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan*, sweeper of the stairwell in an old Calcutta building, stays but doesn't belong. Lahiri brings out the pathos of her situation with gentle sympathy. Graphically brought alive, Boori Ma, with her mite-infested quilt, broom and skeleton keys (of closets left behind in Pakistan) tied along with her life savings to the free end of her sari, loved to chronicle the easier times, she had or didn't have. Twice a day, she would enumerate details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition. An outsider, she narrates what is sceptically viewed as fictional account of her days spent in clover. With an economy that is her hallmark, Lahiri shows Boori Ma "crouched instead, in doorways and hallways and observing gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city." The residents throw her out after a theft because the building needs a "Real Durwan" now.

The feeling of dislocation is emphasised not through any dramatic statements, philosophical theorising but rather through fleshing out of seemingly minor details. No linguistic gyrations or efforts are there to impress, subdue or awe the reader into submission. Irony, not scathing or caustic but mildly laced with empathy, is what runs through most of the stories. For someone who has just embarked on her writing career, Lahiri has managed to attain a rare sense of objectivity and lack of intrusiveness.

It is her decided preference for "showing" and not "telling" that allows her situations to speak for themselves. As there is no overbearing presence of the "author," guiding or steering one through, the reader tends to enjoy a tremendous amount of freedom and autonomy. The title story, *Interpreter of Maladies,* reveals Lahiri's dexterity. It's essentially an interlude between Mina Das and Mr Kapasi, a tourist guide who doubles up as an "interpreter" of the maladies afflicting patients for a doctor. Since there is a sizeable Gujarati population, Mr Kapasi, a polyglot, acts as a conduit between a doctor and his patients.

During a visit to the Sun temple at Konark, he also dons the mantle of a priest for Mrs. Das who confesses about her 'only transgression.' She has been bearing the cross of her pain, articulated as "guilt" by Mr Kapasi. Lahiri creates almost a ritualistic atmosphere for the confession, which takes place against the backdrop of the imposing monastery, with monkeys zeroing upon her illegitimate son, Bobby. The description of how the self-absorbed Mr Das marches on ahead, regardless of the danger lurking around, and how the family looks as if "they were all siblings" is, indeed, very well portrayed.

Lahiri switches viewpoints with consummate ease, creating a mosaic of shifting terrain within her narratives. In *Sexy,* a mid-western girl falls in love with a married Bengali man, without being aware of his marital status. Miranda's childhood memory of a reaction to a painting of Goddess Kali, evoking trepidation and horror doesn't deter her in any way. But once in love, she dreams of deserts and elephants, marble pavilions floating on lakes beneath a full moon, even makes an abortive bid to learn Bengali.

Not only does Lahiri look at the "other" minutely, but the 'exile' is also examined from the viewpoint of the majority culture. *Mrs. Sen's* sees Mrs Sen, a baby-sitter through the eyes of Eliot, a 11-year-old left in her charge. Back home in Calcutta, people think that she lives the life of a queen in a palace. Her loneliness is depicted through the manner in which she waits for the letters, plays a cassette of people talking in her language and nostalgic accounts of Calcutta life she narrates to Eliot. She needs to learn driving if she has to keep her job. Her refusal to learn driving is a symbolic gesture of resistance she offers to her new life; it's basically a refusal to fit in and adapt.

Like most other stories in this collection, *A Temporary Matter* starts on a rather innocuous note. One day, Shobha and Shukumar, a young struggling couple, find a small note in their mail-box, indicating that the electricity would remain disconnected for a few hours, everyday, for a week.

To reassure them, it further states that it's a purely temporary matter. For the young couple, the enforced "darkness" becomes a pretext for discovering their latent, subconscious fears, anxieties and dark secrets. As they talk about "the little ways they'd hurt or disappointed each other and themselves," "their little betrayals," too, surface gradually. By the time the week is over, they have already reached a point of no return. It's during a series of harmless little games around dinnertime they discover the fragile, delicate nature of their relationship. It turns out to be a temporary matter, while they had convinced themselves, even each other of its permanent security, all along. Ironies multiply as Shobha, the breadwinner in this case, decides to walk out on her husband, who at 35 hasn't progressed beyond being a student.

Be it the tragedy of Bibi Haldar and Boori Ma, poignancy of Mrs Sen or the champagne-like *joie de vivre* of Twinkle, Lahiri's characters are flesh and blood human beings who can make us smile or move us to tears.

For the protagonist of *The Third and Final Continent,* the death of his 103-year-old landlady, Mrs Croft is the first death he mourns in America. For hers was the first life he had admired. When Mrs Croft dubbed his wife Mala as a perfect lady, he felt a strange closeness to her, even discovered the magic of love. Earlier, he had looked upon his 'arranged marriage' with a total lack of enthusiasm and much unconcern. Later, in his son's eyes he sees the same ambition that had hurled him across the world. "Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. While the astronauts, heroes forever, spent mere hours on the moon, I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I'm not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly, I'm not the first. Still, there are times, I'm bewildered by each mile I've travelled, each person I've known, each room in which I've slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it's beyond my imagination."

Reading Jhumpa Lahiri is somewhat like discovering the truth behind the words of her character. Ordinariness is, no doubt, pervasive in these stories but it never fails to excite the imagination of the reader. What is more, it almost bewitches the reader, leaving him to wonder whether such grippingly memorable tales can actually be spun out of the stuff that our mundane lives are often made of.

During his recent visit to India, Salman Rushdie is said to have made this observation that American don't want to read about anyone else but themselves, and that's why Indian writers sell less in America than they do in

England. By bringing home the Pulitzer and creating waves across the three continents, Jhumpa Lahiri appears all set to prove Rushdie wrong.