

Interstices as Spaces of Empowerment: A Study of Select Stories in JhumpaLahiri's*Interpreter of Maladies*.

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ABSTRACT

The second generation of immigrant women writers in the first world nations occupies an enhanced position of knowledge and empowerment when in comparison to the first generation of immigrant women writers. The interstices these writers occupy are points of power and knowledge. The project aims to study the lives of second generation of immigrant women in select stories in JhumpaLahiri's*Interpreter of Maladies*, namely, "A Temporary Matter" and "The interpreter of Maladies," how they turn their newly occupied space into a space of opportunity and enhancement. These characters develop hybrid consciousness, a fusion of the past and the present with necessary inclusions and deletions. It is into this newly formed consciousness Lahiri delves to study the working of minds of the new immigrant women. The cultural forces and patriarchy that played significant roles in their homeland are sidelined and almost irrelevant in the lives of these immigrant women. The third world women reclaim agency in their country of adoption and their position at the interstices become enabling spaces of self assertion.

Keywords:Immigrants, Interstices, Empowerment, Second Generation women, Patriarchy, Enhanced Identity, Hybrid Consciousness

Introduction

JhumpaLahiri frames her fictional world around the eternal immigrant experience and the cultural split between a first world nation, America and a third world nation, India. She paints it with unforgettable characters that experience the agony and disillusionment of the middle class. These characters especially women find it necessary to thrive and succeed in an immigrant society where least can be expected by way of help as one would receive from one's people in one's native society.

The project incorporates an in-depth analysis of the female protagonists and their inevitable evolution as powerful women capable of decision making in the stories under study namely Shoba of “A Temporary Matter” and Mina of “Interpreter of Maladies.”

“A Temporary Matter”, presents an informal yet organized progression towards an inevitable end where a free spirited woman moves out of a bitter and painful marriage. It is the story of Shukumar and Shoba whose life was as magical as any newly married couple could ever imagine but they start moving apart after the death of their first child, who was still born. Both of them were proficient in avoiding one another until those eight nights of power failure came about. These eight nights envision the height of creative imagination where the couple starts professing to one another, “the stories not yet revealed.”

Interpreter of Maladies is the story of an immigrant couple, Raj and Mina Das who comes to India along with their three children. They charter a tourist guide named, Kapasi who also works in a doctor’s office as an interpreter of illnesses between the doctor and his patients. Mina Das, the wife, sees his job of interpreter of maladies as “romantic”. The closeness that Mina shows is misconstrued by MrKapasi whose marriage is on the decline. He begins indulging in dreams about her. Mina discloses a long kept secret about her marriage to MrKapasi. She thought Kapasi would interpret some magical remedy for the malady in her life. Mina expects too much of the interpreter. The remedy for the psychological trauma experienced by Mina lies within her and it is not in the capacity of a stranger to prescribe medicines. Mina shows her sense of freedom in speaking out the unspeakable before a complete stranger.

In India, under the patriarchal assumptions, women who do not fit into dominant societal norms are eliminated from consciousness to be rendered invisible. This is the gendered perception of the patriarchal Indian society. Shobha and Mina would definitely fall into this clan of women if they were in India. This is Mina’s first visit to India. Both, Shobha and Mina never see themselves as immigrants. Migrancy is a part of their parents’ lives and by extension a part of their lives too. “The older generation cannot afford to invoke India in an authoritarian mode to resolve problems in diaspora and the younger generation will be ill-advised to indulge in a spree of forgetfulness about where they have come from” (42) says Braziel Jana Evans and Anita Mannur. The immigrant position of these characters overrules the silent, passive victims of a conservative and patriarchal society like India. Shobha and Mina reclaim their agencies in their own subjective ways.

Content

After much contemplation, Shobha of “A Temporary matter” decides to walk out of her loveless marriage. It shows her capacity as a woman, a capacity she has achieved to sort out a life of her own. It is her reclamation of agency. To conceive marriage as a temporary matter is literally impossible by a Indian woman but her empowered position, the interstices has taught her the possibilities that her counterparts back in India has not yet dealt with.

The death of the child has estranged Shobha and Shukumar. They literally do not want to face each other. It is only during the power cuts they start talking to one another in candle light visibility. They confess to one another what they have not yet shared or kept as secrets. Shobha is no longer comfortable in the marriage. The agency that enabled Shobha to walk out of her marriage was the outcome of her immigrant position. Catherine Belsey states the constraining effects of patriarchy when she states:

Despite suffering due to the patriarchal practices and values, women have not been able to overthrow patriarchy. The reason for this is that the female subjectivity itself is constructed and defined by the prevalent patriarchal conventions education, and culture in its broadest sense. (Belsey 593)

On the contrary to assertions made by feminist critics like Belsey, patriarchy has very loose hold on second generation immigrants as the power structures that define patriarchy are displayed more evidently in the respective native cultures. Religion, traditions, rituals, rites and even collective memory has less hold on these characters as they are far away and under no influence of these. Estrangement and resultant separation are the last resort of any marriage in India. Even pairs who outgrow their love and relationship still live together for various reasons outside their individual concerns. Even patriarchy evidenced through religion and parents pose very remote threat to these second generation immigrants. Moreover, soon after marriages immigrants live solely by themselves contrary to the concept of joint family system in India. In India matters of estrangement are taken up by the elders in the family and in most cases they are the decision makers, separation never being a solution.

In “The interpreter of Maladies,” the Das couple is second generation immigrants in America. Their parents have moved back to India. It becomes natural that Mina experiences loneliness when after marriage, Raj drifts into his daily task of teaching and assignments. Added to her woes she conceives her second son from a friend of Raj who happened to stay with them for a few days. This was the long kept secret that she reveals to Kapasi hoping for a soothing remedy. Mina’s enabling agency as immigrant woman makes her open up the extramarital affair before a total stranger. This evidences the loose hold of patriarchy in the lives of these women. S.C Dube states the control of patriarchy on the sexuality of Indian women when he states:

The Ideology of subordination of women . . . is pervasive and has invaded the worldview and ethos of almost the entire Indian society . . . The women’s sexuality is controlled much more strictly than men’s. . . Implicit in the control of sexuality is the control over reproduction, i.e., giving birth to progeny. (Dube 107)

She tells Kapasi that she is troubled by “her secret,” though Raj, her husband, “doesn’t even suspect it” and thinks she is “still in love with him” (65). Kapasi is unable to comprehend the secret thrust upon him. He cannot think outside Indian measure of things. Such is the play of patriarchal ideology upon his self. Ultimately Mina ignores Kapasi and his interpretation. It is her immigrant mindset that enables her to do so. She carries on with her parental duties.

Lahiri redefines, “marriage” in these short stories. It is not an invincible contract. Here it becomes a contract based on mutual understanding and self respect. Both the partners enjoy equal freedom as well as take up equal responsibilities. Shobha takes the difficult decision to end her marriage, while Mina continues to live as a wife and mother. Marriages in Indian immigrant communities defy patriarchy and traditions. It is never a male hegemonic institution. The stories have a feminine inclination. Lahiri pictures female psyche from various perspectives. Her stories are studies in female psychology. Lahiri studies every movement of her female protagonists and attributes those to various psychological developments. For instance, Mina pays undue attention to the affairs of her second son who is born outside her marriage. It is the psychological play of a guilt ridden mother’s mind. The stories raise disturbing question on the concept of marriage.

Desai and Thakkar opines:

The family is not a homogenous group where all the members’ occupy equal positions and derive equal benefits in terms of source, training opportunities and entitlements. The socialization of members and especially girls lead to women themselves accepting their secondary role in family . . . gender difference that are culturally produced are , almost invariably, interpreted as being rooted in biology, as part of the natural order of things. However, gender roles are conceived, enacted and learnt within a complex of relationships. (80)

Unlike the Indian cultural context Mina is in a different patriarchal set up and cultural environment. She is confronted with new problems and new circumstances. This new environment is rather enabling for Mina, as any immigrant woman in the first world, Mina is also able to construct a new positive self free from the constraints of the native community.

The immigrant writers move among geographical, psychological and spiritual borders of two different cultures that are poles apart in their orientations to form a hybrid consciousness that is reflected in the characters they produce. Identities for the immigrants are self made by imbibing the essentials from either side. It is not inherited and improved but an eternal quest to own some point of space in the interstices. Lahiri makes this clear through her stories. For the immigrants, shaping an identity becomes a conscious endeavour. It is often reconciliation and reclamation, reclamation of their agency as women which is a space of opportunities.

Conclusion

Lahiri focuses on the perennial themes of marriage and extra-marital relationships in the borderless world of migrancy where marriage as a social institution never restricts or confines women but endows her with multiplicity of choices. Women exempted from the suffocating world of patriarchal hegemony, finds it difficult to make choices, as selection and rejection in every matter were done for them by the male elders of the family. Immigrant women are open to the liberalized western world where marriage is a contract of convenience. Showalter opines that the basic experiences of women like sex, marriage and child bearing are culturally rooted. She notes:

A theory of culture incorporates ideas about woman's body, language and psyche but interprets them in relation to the social contexts in which they occur. The ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environment. The female psyche can be studied as the product of construction of cultural forces.
(27)

Immigrant women should actually learn to unlearn the cultural chores of native land to incorporate the concept of the new empowered Western female.

The study underlines the fact that immigrant females occupy enhanced positions. The interstices occupied by them are points of enhancement. These are exemplified through the stories selected for study. The study states that each immigrant female carves her own path to freedom and liberation like Shobha and Mina whose stories are dealt with. There is no single way to negotiate identities. Each individual finds their own way of survival. Immigrant identities are in the process of becoming. GayatriSpivak, the Indian-American critic, in "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern" suggests literary texts as "an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of Subaltern women" whose stories have been untold and whose voice have gone unheard (Morton 33). This has apparently turned out to be the great mission of JhumpaLahiri, a writer of her next generation, to create such an alternative sites of enhancement.

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