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**A STUDY ON DIASPORIC WOMEN'S DISCOURSE AS SEEN IN SELECTED SHORT STORIES OF
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *INTERPRETER OF MALADIES***

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The idea of linking gender with discourse began in the 1970s at the United States which later moved across several other countries in the west. Women's liberation movement gave rise to this concept in order to claim gender equality by breaking the stereotypes that existed within discourses. Gender discourse analysis is generally concerned with noticing and analyzing two major areas of language. They are "Speech behavior in men and women on the phonological level, and interactions (conversational style) between women and men in discourse." (Godwin & Wodak, 1999, p. 698). Furthermore, it creates an arena to discuss the use of language in terms of choice of vocabulary and grammatical structure based on the gender. Eckert and McConnell (1992) in their research stated that,

Women's language has been set to reflect their conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward nobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity, and men's language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy and control. (p. 90)

The above features could be speculated based on the influence of the societal position, environmental situation, and the culture of the creator of a discourse, considering the gender. Thus, it is well understood that gender plays a major role in a society and the features associated with the gender solely depend on the culture of the society.

Due to these factors, the usage of language differs on a larger scale. The choice of words, grammatical structure, politeness principles, etc., used by the creator of a discourse would subconsciously depend on the gender and the features associated with it. On the other hand, a conscious choice would also result in the same by bringing a visible difference into play. Hence, the influence of culture on gender is essential to analyze a discourse.

Women's discourse has a set of distinct elements from that of men's discourse, based on their experience in a society with its own culture build up. For example, in a patriarchal society, women's discourse would consist of a different set of features from that of a matriarchal or a neutral society. In a patriarchal situation, language is most often used to fight for their equality and rights rather than to express their carefree thoughts. Here, the choice of words and grammatical structures are altered as they are a response to the hindering dominant male of the society. Contrarily, in a neutral society, the choice of words might be relaxed, direct and liberal when compared to the former. However, "... recent discussion of women's language and women's relation to language has shown, 'women's discourse' is difficult, and perhaps even impossible, to define." (Ford, 1985, p. 310). This is due to the complexities that are attached to women in a society with a culture of its own.

Though defining women's discourse was claimed to be nearly impossible, analyzing the unique ways in which women use language was proposed by various researchers. Qi Pan (2011), in his research, "On the Features of Female Language in English" proposed that the features of the female language can be analyzed

from the “perspectives of phonology, vocabulary, grammar, conversational topics and styles” (p. 1016). Nevertheless, this paper focuses only on vocabulary and grammar used by women. The ultimate aim is to look beyond the discourse of women belonging to a specific society which has a definite culture. It is an attempt to focus specifically on diasporic women’s discourse, considering the complexities that would be portrayed in the language attached to women living in a cultural limbo.

In addition to the features of diasporic writings which include cross-cultural dilemma, ethnic struggle, alienation, dislocation, nostalgia, discrimination, survival, cultural change and identity, a diasporic ‘women’s’ discourse will also touch upon feministic themes such as, search for identity, liberation from patriarchy, loneliness, psychic trauma, suffering, pain, torture, etc. This is attempted to acknowledge and analyze their unique blend of thematic and stylistics elements employed with regards to their cross-cultural conflict and gender.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well acclaimed second generation Indian American Diasporic writer. She won the Pulitzer Prize for “Interpreter of Maladies” (1999), a collection of nine short stories. Her works portray the sufferings and struggles experienced by women in an alien soil. She throws light upon the state of ‘in-betweenness’ as a woman, with which feelings of isolation, alienation, despair, displacement, discrimination, etc. are attached. “A Temporary Matter” and “This Blessed House” from “Interpreter of Maladies” are the two of the nine short stories taken for analysis.

“A Temporary Matter” is a short story about an Indian diasporic couple, Shoba and Shukumar, whose falling marriage life is confronted during a blackout. They are second generation Indian diaspora living in Boston. Shoba works at a publishing house and Shukumar is a research scholar and their relationship is found to be in trouble. After Shoba’s delivery of a still born baby, a huge gap is seen to be created between the couple. Ever since, they become experts in avoiding each other until the blackout. One evening, they receive a notice stating that there would be power cut in the evenings for five consecutive days. To make it interesting, they decide to play a game where they share their untold secrets about each other. The story ends with the couple learning about the journey of their once happy life to the present condition, realizing their flaws.

On the other hand, “This Blessed House” is a short story about Sanjeev and Twinkle, a newly wedded Hindu couple, settled in Connecticut. After their wedding they shift to a house in which the previous owner had left behind various Christian icons. On finding them, Twinkle seems to be surprised and excited and plans to keep them in the house. But Sanjeev hates them. He is unable to tolerate Christian icons in his house. “They irritated him.” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 138). He expresses his dislike towards them to Twinkle, but she is very stern in having them home as she believes that the house is blessed with the icons. Even at the house warming ceremony, Twinkle narrates the entire incident to the guests. The story ends with Sanjeev, in spite of his dislike, agreeing with Twinkle to retain the icons at his house.

The above mentioned short stories can simply be read from the point of view of women’s discourse. It is evident that Lahiri has used the technique of “gender reversal” in “A Temporary matter”. It is Shukumar who does the stereotypical job of a woman by taking care of the house and Shoba is seen as the breadwinner. Lahiri places a contrasting story of Shukumar parents to highlight the gender reversal. His mother falls apart after the death of his father, representing the lifestyle and culture of India whereas, in his case, he is the one falling apart. She carefully juxtaposes this to indicate the cultural differences and hence the change in the gender roles.

On the other hand, Twinkle in “This Blessed House” is the exact opposite of Shoba. She is young and immature. She can be seen as a subaltern when viewed from a feminist perspective. Sanjeev is irritated and angry because Twinkle does not match with the qualities of an “Indian” bride. According to him, a woman is to cook, take care of her husband and do the household chores. Due to this, Twinkle’s actions irritate Sanjeev throughout. The above analysis of the short stories indicates the presence of the features of a women’s discourse in them.

In addition to the above, these stories can also be justified as diasporic writings. There is evident cross-cultural dilemma as the parents of the couples (Shoba-Shukumar and Sanjeev-Twinkle) are rooted with the Indian culture and rituals whereas the protagonists are not actively inclined to a particular culture. Shoba’s mother “cooked dinner every night... washed their cloths... set up a small shrine, a framed

picture of a lavender-faced goddess and a plate of marigold petals, on the bedside table in the guest room” (p. 9). This is in total contrast with the lifestyle of the couples. Though, Shoba plans to celebrate the “rice ceremony”, which never takes place, she is not able to completely recreate Indian culture in an alien land. For Shukumar, the idea of India brings terror and anything related to India and its culture is absurd and alien to him. For “The first time he’d gone as an infant he’d nearly died of amoebic dysentery...As a teenager he preferred sailing camps or scooping ice cream during the summers to going to Calcutta” (p.12).

In “This Blessed House”, Sanjeev is unable to accept an alien culture and religion. It is evident towards the end of the story where he thinks, “all the things that he could do, undisturbed. He could sweep Twinkle’s menagerie into a garbage bag and get in the car and drive it all to the dump and tear down the poster of weeping Jesus, and take a hammer to the Virgin Mary while he was at it.”(p. 154). Twinkle, contrarily, strives to blend along with the surrounding. When Sanjeev disagrees to have Mother Mary’s statue in their lawn, she says, “Every other person in this neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We ‘ll fit right in”

(p. 146). Their dislocation has alienated the characters from their homeland, present surrounding and with the people around them. Lahiri, through her characters, brings in the different types of diasporic people. Shoba is seen to be nostalgic about her days in India but Shukumar is terrorized by the same. Sanjeev, on the other hand, is unable to let in the alien culture of his surroundings but Twinkle longs to blend in. There is a deep sense of struggle to survive by blending the culture of their homeland and the present. But in this process the characters lose their true identity.

Vocabulary is often used to introduce and set the theme of the story. Lahiri has employed simple and colloquial vocabulary. In “A Temporary Matter” words such as “collapse”, “gripping”, “pushing”, “scraping”, “haunting”, etc., set the theme of the story and clearly indicate the dispute between the couple. They also evoke a sense of pathos to set the mood of the story. Words such as “packing”, “retouched”, “dusted”, etc., positioned against “idiotic”, “dragged”, “puzzled”, etc., indicate the setting and tone of “This blessed House”. The concept of setting up a new ‘home’ in an alien land and the disagreements within a newly wedded couple are highlighted. Lahiri has continued to employ mundane, everyday words to create emotionally breaking scenes. For example, toward the end of “A Temporary Matter”, where Shoba rearranges her opinion about Shukumar, after he reveals the secret that he had planned to hide forever is narrated as follows, “He had held his son, who had known life only within her, against his chest in a darkened room in an unknown wing of the hospital”(p. 22). She does not exaggerate the situation by using excessive words to describe the shock and realization but keeps it simple and lets the readers to assimilate the situation.

The narration of the selected short stories is embedded with a lot of Indian vocabulary, especially the names of Indian food such as, “malai”, “ground coriander”, “rice”, “rogan josh”, etc., to indicate their diasporic identity and mixed culture. To a larger extent, in a diasporic writing, it is with food that the protagonists relate with their homeland. Their love for the place they believe to belong is mostly expressed through their love for the food of that place. Both the short stories have food as a predominant symbol to highlight the diasporic nature. In addition to this, Lahiri plays with words to show the state of conflict among the protagonists and also the identity of the diasporic communities. For example, “Rogan Josh” and “Jazz station”, “rice” and “forks”, “ground coriander seeds” and “ glass of wine”, etc. In “The Temporary Matter”, “Rogan Josh”, a traditional food of Kolkata is seen to be enjoyed by Shoba and Shukumar, with the accompaniment of “Jazz music” that originated in the African- American communities of New Orleans, United States. “Rice”, the staple food of India which is most often eaten with hands is seen to be comfortable consumed with “forks”. “Ground coriander seeds” are typically used to season food in India. Having “wine” along with dinner indicates western culture. By juxtaposing food and culture of the east and the west, Lahiri clearly indicates the mixed state of mind of diasporic people. They are seen to be influenced by the culture of the homeland as well as the land of survival. It is observed that, the words are picked out carefully and arranged in a suitable sentence structure to bring out the conflict, mixed identity and other elements of diaspora in the simplest way possible.

Lahiri carefully uses moderate sentence structure in her short stories. She employs short sentences or fragments for dialogues and moderate to lengthy sentences in her narration. For example,

Shoba: What’s all this? ... (narration)

Shoba: You made *rogan josh*, ... (narration)

Shukumar: It's ready, ... (narration)

Shoba: Perfect timing, (p. 10-11)

In the above conversation, the dialogues are short and depend on the context narrated by Lahiri. This could also be seen as a unique diasporic style where context plays an important role. Lahiri implies that without understanding the context of diasporic people, their feelings, emotions, ideas and thought process is merely impossible to be studied. The style of the language used is evident in her narration where she uses lengthy sentences. "In the end they settled on a compromise: the statue would be placed in a recess at the side of the house, so that it wasn't obvious to passerby, but was still clearly visible to all who came." (p. 150). She has intentionally used lengthy sentences to narrate to clearly highlight and explain the diasporic context, tone and mood of the stories. The tone used in the stories is dull, depressing and passive, to indicate conflict, dilemma and lack of understanding found among the diasporic communities.

Lahiri has also employed huge number of symbols, metaphors and imageries in these short stories to give several layers of meaning to the texts. They also bring to light the diasporic features embedded in the stories. Food can be seen as a diasporic symbol, metaphor and imagery in the stories of Lahiri. Indian food eaten by the couples in America symbolizes their longing for homeland. The fusion food consumed by the couples, stand as a metaphor for their mixed or confused identity as a diaspora. Example: "Stew made with fish" (p.142) eaten with "Italian bread" (p.143). Food can also be seen as imagery throughout. Example: "... whatever it was that she cooked today, it was unusually tasty, attractive even, with bright white cubes of fish, and flecks of parsley, and fresh tomatoes gleaming in the dark brown-red broth" (p. 144). This evokes the sense of taste, smell, and sight of Indian food.

Apart from food, there are several other symbols, metaphors and imagery seen in the stories. For instance, the blackout in "The Temporary Matter" is immediately associated by Shoba with her experience in India, where there are frequent blackouts. She recalls the rice ceremony she had attended during a blackout and explains how the baby had cried the whole time. The rice ceremony is a celebration which is held in India, immediately after five to six months of the birth of a baby. Here, blackout stands as a symbol that helps Shoba recall and relate to her homeland. It is often found that most of the unusual events that the protagonists face in America directly take them back to the pleasant, unpleasant memories of their homeland. Through these unusual symbols, metaphors, and imagery, Lahiri indicates the disparity of the east and the west.

Thus, Lahiri has not missed a situation to create a diasporic aura around her characters. She is seen to be using a specific and distinct discourse of diasporic women. Through the above analysis, it is studied that she has specifically focused on different situation, environment and context unlike the usual women's discourse that generalizes them. Women of Lahiri's short stories are found to be typical diasporic women as they confirm to all the features of a diasporic women. The Language used is found to be effective and powerful than that of a women's writing as it emphasizes the importance of diasporic context. Also, various language devices are seen to be employed to create a complete diasporic women's discourse. By this, she defines a different genre altogether and offers scope for analyzing a discourse based on its portrayal of gender, culture and use of language. Thus, there are ample discourse features seen in the above select stories of Lahiri to suggest that there has been a conscious attempt on the part of the writer both in the selection of subject matter and the choice of language to make her writings truly that of Diasporic Women writings.

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