RESEARCH ARTICLE

COOKING MEMORIES: JHUMPA LAHIRI'S STORIES

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Article Info:
Article Received:12/04/2014
Revised on:19/5/2014
Accepted for Publication:24/05/2014

ABSTRACT

Shukumar and Shoba's boredom with the Bengali poetry session that they both gone to attend and their difficulty in understanding difficult words is a lossunites the two of them in the beginning. He thought back to their first meeting, four years earlier at a lecture hall anywhere a group of Bengali poets was giving a recital. They'd ended up by side, on folding wooden chairs. Sycamore was soon bored; he was unable to cipher the literary diction, and couldn't join the rest of the audience as tiled and nodded solemnly after certain phrases, [...] When he turned his head to left, he saw a woman next to him making a grocery list on the back of a folder, was startled to find that she was beautiful. (*Interpreter of Maladies* 13).

Shukumar and Shoba's reaction to Bengali poems can be contrasted to Divakaruni's protagonists, mainly first-generation immigrants, who constantly use Bengali saying, songs and lullabies. Amy Tan in her novel *The Joy Luck Club* bring out this point in her study of first generation Chinese —American mothers and their second — generation Chinese — American daughters. The communication gap between the mothers and the daughters who are divided by a language barrier is poignantly brought out in the novel. The language becomes the key to understanding a culture: "And she waited year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English" (Tan 4). The distance from the language of the home country in the stories of many of the diasporic writers suggests a loss of heritage.

In "This Blessed House", we are taken to the house of another young Indian couple, Twinkle, second generation immigrant and Sanjeev, a first generation immigrant, who have moved to a new house in Boston. The house as the title suggests, is "blessed". As they settle down, they keep finding little tokens, mementos and even a poster of Jesus Christ. Sanjeev is annoyed at Twinkle's love for them and simply wants to throw them away. To him these are Christianmementoes that have no place in their Hindu household. The climax comes during their house warming

party when Twinkle discovers from the attic a solid silver bust of Christ. Sanjeev finds that he hates the "dignity", "solemnity", and "beauty" it contained but "most of all he hated it because he knew that Twinkle loved it"(*Interpreter of Maladies* 157). What are we to make of Sanjeev'sunreasonable hatred? Is it only the possessive jealously of a newly married husband who wants complete attention from his wife or does this run deeper? He is perhaps uncomfortable with the artifacts; they become for him symbols of an alien culture to which Twinkle clings, much to his discomfort: "She would never put it in her study, he knew. For the rest of their days together, she would keep it on the center of the mantel, flanked on either side by the rest of the menagerie" (*Interpreter of Maladies 157*).

Key Words: Generation, Diasporic, immigrant, culture

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Twinkle and Sanjeev's vastly different attitudes, perhaps point out the difference in their attitude towards Christianity and an alien culture, the attitudes the first and the second — generation immigrants have:

> All the neighbors will see. They'll think we insane'
>
> `Why, for having a statue of the Virgin Mary on our lawn? Every other person in this
>
> The neighborhood has a statue of Mary on the lawn. We'll fit right in.'
>
> 'Weren't Christian.'
>
> 'So you keep reminding me.' (*Interpreter of Maladies 146)*

The story brings to mind Divakaruni's" Doors" where she projects, how little things can create disharmony in the relationship between Preeti, who had also migrated to America as a child and Deepak, her husband, who had come to America only recently. When Sanjeev's marriage to Twinkle enters a rough patch Sanjeev:" thought with a flicker of regret of the snapshots his mother used to send him from Calcutta, of prospective brides who could sing and sew and season lentils without tying a cookbook" (*Interpreter of Maladies 146*). Like Divakauni'*ARRANGEDMarriage* this story also points out that far.Indian women, whatever the hardships America has been liberating space in terms of individual expression.

In "Sexy", Miranda, a young American woman, is the story-teller. In this, Lahiri juxtaposes the notion of a virtuous Indian wife the white, non-Indian "mistress", as she shatters the myth of the watertight compartments of "good" and"evil" between the two. Laxmi's cousin's story of the wronged-and-abandoned-wife-alone- with-the-genius-son is balanced with Miranda's story, who is having an affair with a married Bengali man Dev, whose wife has gone to India on vacation. Lahiri is breaking down stereotypes in this story. Dev makes it clear that his wife is not ugly or unattractive. He says she looks like the film star Madhuri Dixit, but he finds Miranda "sexy". The encounter with the young boy of Laxmi's cousin jerks Miranda back to the reality of her affair with Dev and she breaks it off even though she longs for him. The image of Miranda as the outsider has been very subtly painted in this story. Though the story is set in America, it turns out to be Miranda's struggle to make sense of the Indian sub-culture from the popular Indian hot Mixsnack, to Madhuri Dixit, to the maze of the Bengali Alphabet, as she strives towards a better understanding of the man she has fallen in love with; Miranda opened her Filofax, where she had written 'Monterey Dixit.' She looked up at the videos on the shelves behind the counter. She saw women [... J they were beautiful, the way the women dancing on the beach were beautiful, with kohl-rimmed eyes and long black hair. She knew then Madhuri Dixit was beautiful too"

(Interpreter of Maladies 99). The bewilderment of Miranda, who feels marginalized in her own country amongIndiansos perhaps mirrored by Mrs. Sen' s bewilderment to make sense of the American way of living in "Mrs. Sen's" and shows, though in a different sense than speak, the mainstream' s puzzlement with the "subaltern".

"Mrs. Sen's" too has an American storyteller, this time a young boy, Eliot.This story is partly autobiographical. Lahiri partially bases this story on her mother who used to babysit in her house. Lahiri said that she used to see her mother take care of American children and wonder that they must have thought differently of her mother from the way Lahiri thought of her. She says in her interview with Patel:"It's my eternal fascination with trying to imagine things that I am not part of (Patel 8). The lonely young boy goes to the Mrs. Sen's house each afternoon after school till his mother comes to pick him up after office in the evenings. These two very different people bond in this story through their shared loneliness. This story emphasizes the difficulties and loneliness faced by Indian wives who are left all alone at home, without friends and family, while their husbands immerse themselves in the professional lives that brought them to the United States. Eliot,though a young boy, is confident of his identity as an American, while we see Mrs.Sen struggling to accept a very different way of life in America, a life she findsintensely lonely and baffling. In this story of food becomes a key component ofMrs. Sen's identity. Cooking is the only thing she is confident of in this new country and she clings to the Indian way of cooking tenaciously, which Eliot finds very strange yet exciting:

He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen as she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. The blade was hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base. The steel, more black than silver, lacked a uniform polish, and has a serrated crest, she told Eliot, for grating. Afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart." *(Interpreter of Maladies 114).*

The simple, unthinking act of chopping vegetables by Mrs. Sen and Eliot amazement at it point out to the cultural differences between the two. Eliot's perspective on Mr. and Mrs. Sen is perhaps the closest the writer goes to provide an unbiased Western point of view on the Indian way of living. Mrs. Sen'sobsession for fresh fish is her way of replicating the home situation in the only way she can. Her confidence in the fish market surprises Eliot, though it is not so surprising.Cooking is her only accomplishment in the new country and that is what she offers to Eliot's mother every evening, though Eliot's mother fails to recognize it. Mrs.Sen's inability to master her driving skills is an instance of her inability to adapt to the American way of life, something that Eliot's mother does thoughtlessly. Mrs.Sen's intense longing for India distinguishes her from most of the other characters in this collection. She is a first generation immigrant who is still not reconciled to her exile.

The memories of India she narrates to the young boy as she chops vegetables, the recorded cassette of her people speaking in Bengali that she plays, the letters from India that come to her occasionally, the conservative way in which she behaves with Mr. Sen are all alien to Eliot, and him India it becomes a story to be heard each afternoon. This story has an acute sense of exile, estrangement, and displacement, both emotional and cultural. The only way Mrs. Sen can keep her memories fresh is through telling and retelling her ways of life in India, like Burma who keeps telling her stories before the partition. In a sense Mrs. Seniors are vague, too, until she makes sense of the new world she has come to. Ashima inLahiri's novel, *The Namesake*, also has to go through this phase: "For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy — a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life has vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding" (*The Namesake 49-50*).

"The Third and the Final Continent" takes the diasporic experience a little further. This story is filled with optimism, as the male narrator successfully survivesliterally in all the three

continents. This is a story of empathy, of dissolving cultural boundaries. The narrator respects and likes his old American landlady, Mrs. Croft,and she returns the compliment by finding the narrator's new, young Indian wifeMala to be "a perfect lady". The young couple settles down and raises their unsuccessfully in America and at the end of the story the storyteller can tell:

I have remained in this new world for nearly thirty years. I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times when I am bewildered by each mile that I have traveled, [...] As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (*Interpreter of Maladies 198*)

"The third and Final Continent" is the ideal continent, not geographically,but metaphorically speaking, towards which all the characters in this story strive.The third continent is something that the characters create out of their assimilation of the two cultures they become a part of, after they internalize the disharmonies and create their own individual harmonies. The interaction between the young man and his ageing landlady shows how they come to accept and respect each other's culture:

I wondered if Mrs. Croft had ever seen a woman in a sari, with a dot painted on her forehead and bracelets stacked on her wrists. I wondered what she would object to. I wondered if she could see the red dye still vivid on Mala's feet, all but obscured by the bottom edge of her sari. At last Mrs. Croft declared, with the equal measures of disbelief and delight, I knew well: She is a perfect lady! Now it was I who laughed. I did so quietly, and Mrs. Croft did not hear me. But Mala had heard,and, for the first time, we looked at each other and smiled. *(Interpreter of Maladies195-96*)

Like many of Divakaruni's and Lahiri's stories, this story shows how,despite cultural differences, all human beings share the same basic needs for communication, understanding and compassion.

JhumpaLahiri does not tell us stories of diplomats, she tells us stories of y people across continents. Yet the minutely descriptive and intricate tales become stories between nations, as she translates the maladies closest to the hearts of her characters. "The Treatment of BibiHalder" is the only story in this collection where she actually talks about a physical ailment. Yet in this story too we have been made to wonder at the end how much of her ailment is physical and how much of it is the manifestation of a woman craving to become a mother. This story also has a real life counterpart. Lahiri says in her interview with ArunAguiar for the PifMagazine.that for this story she took her subject matter from a young woman she knew in India who used to have epileptic fits, but who Lahiri knew to be medically fit otherwise and who wanted to get married. In this story Lahiri describes the Hindu marriage rituals, the butterfly embossed photo albums, vermilion-painted fish, garlands, and other images to evoke a foreign culture for her American readers. Yet she deftly interprets the ease and the west, perhaps because she feels to be an outsider sometimes in both the cultures and has the "double vision" that most diasporic writers have. *Interpreter of Maladies* has been translated in Bengali as"BoghasirBedona" ("The Pain of the Translator") and perhaps highlights this aspect of her stories.

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