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Linguistic Pilgrimage: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's 'In Other Words'

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri an eminent diasporic writer of the twenty first century has four novels and two short story collection to her credit. Her writing marks the representation of social and political alienation in the adopted land, cultural hybridity, ambivalence for new, associations with the past and seeking identity within all these. Her non-fiction *In Other Words* deals with her love to learn Italian language. Her delving deep into to assimilate the language completely is at the centre of this autobiographical memoir. The work is not less than a linguistic pilgrimage of a devoted pilgrim.

Keywords: Diaspora, hybridity, ambivalence, identity, linguistic.

Nilanjana Sudeshna "Jhumpa Lahiri" an eminent American author known for writing under the genre novel, short story, essays in English and recently in Italian. The author has penned from notable words of fiction: *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and *The Lowland*. Most recently her work of non-fiction was published in Italian. "Teach Yourself Italian" (2015) was published in *The New Yorker*. Her first book composed in Italian entitled 'In alter parole' (2015) was translated in English by Ann Goldstein with the title *In Other Words* published in 2016.

In Other Words is a venture to study and learn Italian, a linguistic pilgrimage for nearly twenty years. It captures the elements of culture and language which are tied through a thin bond. This tremendous link between them explores the complex relationship of individuals to their tradition. Her ambivalence for Italian language, which is a third language for her, a sense of discontent for being acquainted only one language and being undesignated towards the native language, Bengali are at the core of the novel. A close scrutiny of the novel *In Other Words* portrays the identity, exile, displacement, cultural crisis, alienation, assimilation of values and a third cultural background with its roots shown to be delve deeply in the yearning for a foreign language.

"*In Other Words* is Lahiri's most personal work...She makes the reader a secret sharer in the grand love story between her and Italian" (Roy, *IOW* i) The novel is a beautiful journey to Italy, acquainting its culture, language

and the novelists love for a 'third language'. This confessional memoir by Lahiri was originally written in Italian. This third language she learnt as an adult, the love for the same developed during her visit to Florence. *In Other Words* is an odyssey in order to reshape the identity of the author, her self-discipline and control while learning Italian.

It won't be an exaggeration to call the novel a love story of an individual for a language. It speaks about the lengthy courtship that developed as a passion inside the author. We are well acquainted with such an obsession and had heard of it several times. Usually, such a relation grew in between two individuals. Here, in this work Jhumpa, the author feels the same kind of love for the language. This elevator love grew during her visit to Florence. This profound love grew intense when she studied Italian for many years afterward, while living in US. However, she found true mastery always eluding.

The venture to study Italian was like learning the lessons of swimming, counting the strokes, fear of being secluded in the middle, sinking etc. Once crossed the water she feels elated. This journey took her a span of twenty years to assimilate the language almost completely. She has to sacrifice her first language, the authoritative one during this voyage. She decided to cross the Atlantic this time, that took on a ship and has started living in Italy. She felt satisfied "...of having grown up at least a little." (*IOW* 11)

The themes of alienation, ambivalence, identity and metamorphosis are perfectly blended in this piece of non-fiction by Jhumpa. The author uses several metaphors to express her love, dedication, enthusiasm and attraction for the language. Readers could feel one with the author in this mesmerizing journey. Themes of ambivalence and alienation go hand in hand in this work. Jhumpa becomes a linguistic pilgrim to Rome through her official renunciation of her step language (English). She pledges to speak and read only Italian. It's like a dream that she nurtures. Her diligence for the same is remarkable to observe. Her devotion seems to be a vocation than a folly. This acquaintance for another language is a shift from English language. "We don't come from the same place, from the same family. We didn't grow up with one another. This language is not in my blood, in my bones. I'm drawn to Italian and at the same time intimidated. It remains a mystery, beloved, impassive." (*IOW* 44)

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Lahiri takes us to this marvelous journey of her in a picturesque manner and has skillfully constructed it through her use of the metaphors. Through the metaphor of the lake she has depicted her swimming lessons (lessons of Italian), earlier she couldn't swim but now can walk in it. Still she pretends to be a novice in that direction to escape the chances of being caught as unskilled. She believes herself to be dumb after having spoken a few sentences in Italian. The language seems to be elusive and evanescent. In 2004 when she noticed an advertisement having written, 'Imparare l'italiano', 'Learn Italian' she grasps the opportunity and found a lady tutor from Milan. Soon she felt the language coming and returning with the teacher for visits her once in a week for an hour. Still her quest for the language continues. She copes to find an identity with this love at first sight of hers. She speaks and uses English with an authority of being skilled in it but for Italian she feels a yearning, an awaitment to get completely emerged into it, deep and forever. Wherever she went (US or Rome) continued her childlike desire to acquire the language. Though imperfect, she lived inside the language, she felt connected to Italy. She moves on speaking impeccable Italian. "It seems like a language with which I have to have a relationship. It's like a person met one day by chance, with whom I immediately feel a connection...still everything to discover" (IOW 16)

The books purchased during this endeavor of hers appear to be an 'authoritative parent' earlier which soon turns to a brother when her indiscreet and absurd longing for the language becomes prominent. At some moment she feels alienated from the languages she is learning or had learnt a connection and at the same time a detachment. Jhumpa believes herself to be a two- faced Janus, who simultaneously looks into the past and future at the same time. She could write in one language and can read in another. In spite of the limitations, the horizon seems boundless. The eternal love she nurtures in her heart for the language arouses excitement and at emotions every moment. She wants to discover more. Sometimes she calls it a 'Sisyphean task', her folly to grasp every word that she comes across.

Lahiri has depicted a beautiful metaphor here; she calls herself a gardener, plucking Italian vocabulary as a gardener plucks weeds from the cultivated land. Her final submission to the language happened with her shifting to Rome for almost a year. She initiated writing premature and reckless Italian. Her diary seems to be like a semi-literate. Her devotion towards the language appears to her cap, she starts writing short stories 'The Exchange.' Now the writer has an elaborated vocabulary in Italian. She has absorbed the language for years, from varied sources. For the last two years she is rehearsing it daily. When she writes or expresses herself in Italian the 'usual flavour is missing.' (IOW 162) Jhumpa believes that she is lacking in that sharp vision to excel in Italian. She feels as an intruder or an imposter. This

authority is what she desires for. "Writing is my only way of absorbing and organizing life. Otherwise it would terrify me; it would upset me too much." (IOW 83)

Lahiri's entire journey to assimilate Italian was not less than a roller coaster ride, but she felt overwhelmed doing every bit of it. The most elusive and unfathomable vocabulary and the avalanche of things done in order to attain the goal of learning the language are the most memorable moments of this linguistic exile. This intellectual exploit thrilled her every day, every hour, every moment. She fills her basket every day 'at the end of the day the basket is heavy, overflowing, I feel loaded down, wealthy, in high spirits...I am like a beggar who finds a pile of gold, a bag of jewels." (IOW 50)

The themes of alienation, ambivalence and identity go side by side. The entire work is a voyage through the vacillating experiences during this linguistic adventure. The author succeeds in this race, where she competes alone. She had made a relation with her imperfection. A progressive transformation from that of a novice to Italian translator is observed through her composition and translation on her own. After spending almost a year in Rome, return wasn't easy for her. She could sense an aching homesickness. She calls it "Linguistic isolation and melancholy" (IOW 123). Her love for Italian has bestowed her new identity. A day has come when she could feel one with Italian. She feels emerged in the language "I'm in the middle of the lake and I'm swimming with them, in my own way." (IOW 130)

Lahiri feels overwhelmed by this new transformation rather a metamorphosis. Ombretta Frau says, "*In Other Words* is an elegant and refined book that shows, little by little Lahiri's cultural and linguistic metamorphosis." She feels jealous when a Roman lady praises her husband for having a clear Italian accent than hers. "I'm the one who desperately loves your language, not my husband." (IOW 128)

The time has approached when she realized that language is equivalent to voice and authority. Being in a foreign land among unknown persons, without knowing language of that land one feels illegitimate and unauthorized. She feels surrounded by a wall in between her native tongue and English (adopted land). The same wall is in between her and Italian. The wall surrounds her wherever she goes, separating her. The wall will prevail whether she speaks polished Italian. On a whole this linguistic journey, a voluntary exile from English, her step language offers her a different 'literary path'. "As her immersion in Italian deepens, Lahiri fears losing her moorings with literary English." (Luzzi Joseph, review IOW). Being a writer she has the power to create, demolish and recreate. Her partial disabilities for the language are going to retain for the rest of her life. But she feels content that her love and quest for

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knowing Italian persists forever. This weakness prevail her quest for the knowledge and eternal love for the language.

Lahiri was one with the Hungarian author, Agota Kristof who was compelled to live in France and learned French to express her experiences of being deported from Hungary. *The Notebook* was one among that trilogy. "I've spoken French for more than thirty years, I've written it for twenty, but I still don't know it. I can't speak it without mistakes and I can write it only with the help of a dictionary that I consult frequently." (*IOW* 200)

Agotha Kristof regretted to leave her native language and adopted French under compulsion, therefore, considered it 'the enemy language' (*IOW* 201), whereas Lahiri wants to linger on separation from her love (Italian). She never misses English or Bengali, both being her adopted and native tongue.

Lahiri being a diasporic writer depicts the cultural hybridity, geographical dislocations, mimicry in language and culture, ambivalence and alienation raised and dilemma of identity through her works. *In Other Words* follows the same tradition. It is "an honest, engaging and very moving account of a writer searching for herself in words." (Kirkus Reviews, online)

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