

In Other Words : A Saga of Love with Language

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ABSTRACT

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well known name in Indian Diaspora writing. She has written stories and novels about the Indians as well as Indian migrants living in America. She is a master in describing the cultural conflict of Indians and their sense of alienation and exile. She is well acquainted with the situation of linguistic turmoil in life. Being a daughter of Bengali parents she is forced to speak Bengali as well as she has to master English to survive in America. But she has no sense of belonging with any of these languages. She chooses to learn Italian language in order to get away from her past existence. Her latest book *In Altre Parole* translated in English as *In Other Words* is her 'linguistic autobiography'. This paper aims at showing the causes of Lahiri's desire to express herself in a new language and her choice of Italian language. We will try to find out the reasons for her infatuation to Italian language and see how hard she labours to acquire and adopt it. We will also analyse her methods of acquiring the Italian language and the fruit of her labour, the book - *In Other Words*.

Every year thousand of books, from various languages of the world are translated into English. English, being lingua franca of the world gives opportunity to these writers to reach more and more people. English is the most widely read language of the world. So almost every prominent writer and work is available in English translation. A new and surprising name to the list of translated authors is of Jhumpa Lahiri. Jhumpa Lahiri's latest book *In Altre Parole* is in Italian language translated by Ann Goldstein into English as *In Other Words*. Ann Goldstein is an American editor and translator from the Italian language. She is best known for the translation of Enea Ferrante, an Italian novelist's *Neapolitan Quartet*, a series of four books.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well known figure in English literary world. Author of two short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies* and *Unaccustomed Earth* and two novels *The Namesake* and *The Lowland*, she fixed the literary spot-light on her with, the publication of her very first work *Interpreter of Maladies*, as this won for her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction of 2000. Her maiden novel *The Namesake* was filmed by famous producer and director Mira Nair.

When we consider Jhumpa Lahiri's literary standing in contemporary English literature, some questions arise naturally. Being an Anglophone, why did she choose to write in Italian, renouncing English which is certainly a more widely read tongue than Italian? Why did she not translate it herself? How to analyse and judge *In Other Words*? Because when we read a translated work, as Latha Anantharaman says:

We miss, and misunderstand, a great deal. We can judge the readability of the result, or skill in conveying metaphor and idiom, and we can be captivated by the story, but can we judge whether the original writing was good?¹

In Other Words is an autobiographical work. This work investigates and reveals the process of learning a foreign-language. It traces the lingual and emotional journey of the author. At heart, *In Other Words* is a love-story; a love between a writer and a language. It is a story of a long and difficult courtship and a passion that reaches to the height of obsession. An Obsession for a language which, in no way is associated to the author. In her love story, Jhumpa Lahiri discusses her relationship with Italian as well as English and Bengali.

Jhumpa Lahiri bases her identity on language. For her language is the reflection of the personality. She is a multilingual in the true sense of the word. She has faced linguistic turmoil in her life since childhood. Her very first language was Bengali. She writes:

My very first language was Bengali, handed down to me by my parents. For four years, until I went to school in America, it was my main language and I felt comfortable in it.....²

But after sometime, when her schooling started, her Bengali wasn't capable of holding her. Bengali had to take its steps back and make way for English. Now English became her main language:

A few years later, however, Bengali took a step backwards, when I began to read. I was six or seven. From then on my mother tongue was no longer capable, by itself of rearing me, in a certain sense it died. English arrived, a stepmother.³

She was unable to identify with any of these languages. At home she had to speak Bengali and follow Bengali customs, but publicly she had to show herself as American as any other native. In a conversation with Mary A. Dempse, she reveals-

At home I followed the custom of my parents speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends.⁴

Lahiri wanted to deny Bengali for English but Bengali was the personification of her parents. She admits this in the above mentioned conversation. She further writes:

Everything will change once they (her parents) die. They will take certain things with them-conversation in another tongue, and perceptions about the difficulties of being foreign, without them, the back and forth life my family leads, both literally and figuratively will at last approach stillness. An anchor will drop and a line of connection will be severed.⁵

This regular linguistic shifting seems to disturb her. There was a linguistic confusion which she was unable to resolve:

Those two languages of mine didn't get along. They were incompatible adversaries, intolerant of each other. I thought they had nothing in common except me, so that I felt like a contradiction in terms myself.⁶

At around the age of twenty five Jhumpa Lahiri discovered her love for the Italian language and visited Italy for the first time in 1994. She was immediately infatuated with Italian language. It was a new point of her linguistic journey. With the arrival of Italian, the linguistic triangle was completed with English being its base:

If I were to draw it I would use a pen to draw the English side, a pencil for the other two. English remains the base, the most stable, fixed side. Bengali and Italian are both weaker, indistinct.⁷

Jhumpa Lahiri inherited Bengali from her parents. She had no choice in this matter. She learned English out of necessity. It was necessary for her survival. But she could not associate herself with any of these languages. She felt torn between them. When Lahiri visited Italy for the first time in 1994, she fell in love with Italian language immediately. She went there to study Renaissance architecture but she was more interested in learning language. After her return she felt herself in exile from Italian. She longed for the language in America.

Because of her double identity Lahiri felt frustrated. She was in a state of perpetual conflict. She felt neither American nor Indian. There always hanged a sense of uncertainty. From the void of uncertainty came the creative impulse. She has been writing to feel alone since childhood. She gives the cause of her writing :

Why do I write ? To investigate the mystery of existence. To tolerate myself. To get closer to everything that is outside of me. If I want to understand what moves me what confuses me, what pains me-everything that makes me react, in short- I have to put it into words. Writing is my only way of absorbing and organizing life. Otherwise it would terrify me, it would upset me too much.⁸

For Jhumpa Lahiri writing is a way of deciphering life.

She began to write English short stories and with the instant success of her first collection *Interpreter of Maladies* became a celebrity. Her successive books secured her position as a writer in English. But Lahiri thinks that security threatens a writer. She wants a change of direction in her literary career.

Everyone at a certain point in his/her life feels an urge for change. Jhumpa Lahiri wants to escape from her past life. She thinks that a new language can give a new direction to her life. For her a new language is a new life. She wants to demolish herself as a writer and recreate herself. For her Italian is a flight:

As I said before, I think that my writing in Italian is a flight. Dissecting my linguistic metamorphosis, I realize that I am trying to get away from something, to free myself.⁹

And what was she fleeing from ? She answers :

The most obvious answer is the English language. But I think it's not so much English in itself as everything the language has symbolized for me. For practically my whole life English has represented a consuming struggle, a wrenching conflict, a continuous sense of failure that is the source of almost all my anxiety. It has represented a culture that had to be mastered, interpreted. I was afraid that it means a break between me and my parents. English denotes a heavy, burdensome aspect of my past. I am tired of it.¹⁰

So it is clear that Lahiri wants to get away from all her cultural bonds of the past. Joseph Luzzi very suggestively remarks at Lahiri's choice of Italian :

It is fitting that a nation with no unifying language for centuries should inspire a writer of Lahiri's stature to organize her reflections around the concept of exile.¹¹

Luzzi further says :

The new language freed her from what she describes as the clash between the Bengali of her Indian parents and the English she learned after her family immigrated to the united states and her childhood home in Rhodes Island.¹²

As Jhumpa Lahiri has described she fell in love with Italian language immediately when she first visited Italy in 1994. She felt herself exiled from the language she loved. She began to learn Italian from tutors while she was in America. She employed as much as three private tutors to learn Italian. Her first teacher was a lady from Milan who used to come at Lahiri's home once in a week for an hour. With her help Lahiri began to learn Italian but when she went to the literary festival in Rome, she was not able to put more than five sentences at a time. It was a wake up call for her. In 2008 she began her preparation with a new teacher. This new teacher was from Bergamo. With this teacher Lahiri's comprehension of the language improved. But when Lahiri tried to have real conversation , she was aware of her mistakes and errors. In 2009, she started with her new teacher. This new teacher was

a Venetian woman. Lahiri used to go to her house and with her she felt quite confident and learning Italian began to seem possible. During this period she decided to move to Italy :

At a certain point the lessons with the Venetian teacher become my favorite activity. As I study with her, the next inevitable step in this strange linguistic journey become clear. At a certain point, I decide to move to Italy.¹³

Lahiri has given a detailed description of the process of learning Italian that would be helpful for any student of a foreign language. She immersed herself in Italian language. Six months before her departure to Rome, she decided to read nothing but Italian. She describes the way she reads a book in Italian with the help of a dictionary. Gathering new words and phrases she tried to learn as many words as possible. Every new word was like a gem for her:

I read slowly, painstakingly. With difficulty. Every page seems to have a light covering of mist. The obstacles stimulate me. Every new construction seems a marvel. Every unknown word a jewel.¹⁴

Lahiri keeps on gathering as much words as possible but memory betrays; it doesn't hold up. But even if memory fails, she keeps on gathering words. For her, process matters not the result. Her understanding of Italian began to grow day by day. She reaches Rome and there she starts to hear Italian in her brain. She starts to write a diary in Italian.

Everyone knows, a language is a socio-geographical product. It is almost impossible for a foreigner to learn a language perfectly to which one does not belong. Language is not like a small lake; as Lahiri has described in the beginning of the book, language is a vast ocean. One may try as hard as one can but there are certain things about language which one cannot learn through books. Lahiri realizes the impossibility of learning Italian completely. Modern inventions have made the world smaller but the languages are still to be learned the harder way round. It is well said, language comes first, grammar afterwards. A language very often transcends its own grammar. Lahiri presents very clearly her practice in Italian grammar and her problems as well- the problem of preposition, the problem of articles, the difficulty of resembling words and of comparison of two things.

In spite of all these difficulties Lahiri kept on working on her Italian. When she receives an invitation to go to Capri to a literary festival, she decides to write her presentation in Italian, notwithstanding the assumption that being an Anglophone, she will write her piece in English and it will be translated into Italian. Though there is no equality in language. Lahiri knows that her Italian is and will always be weaker than her English. Not only she writes her presentation in Italian but also has a conversation in Italian with an English translator. In this way the circle of learning the new language is now complete and is reversed also. Jhumpa Lahiri writes:

Listening to my interpreter, I trust my Italian for the first time. Although he'll remain forever the younger brother, the little guy pulls through.¹⁵

Jhumpa Lahiri labours for twenty years to learn Italian. After such a long struggle she has a good grasp on the language and a comprehensive understanding of its literature.

In spite of having such a thorough understanding of the language, Jhumpa Lahiri is discouraged rather reprimanded by the common Italian folk. The same problem is faced by her in America with regard to English because of her name and appearance. Even in India she is not supposed to understand Bengali. In spite of having known different languages Jhumpa Lahiri is surrounded everywhere by a wall. She realizes that written language hides her personality and appearance. That's why she has chosen to write, to break down the wall :

I write in order to break down the wall, to express myself in a pure way. When I write, my appearance, my name have nothing to do with it. I am heard without being seen, without prejudices, without a filter. I am invisible. I become my words, and the words become me.¹⁶

Jhumpa Lahiri's writing in Italian was constrained by her limited vocabulary. Still she kept on working because she wanted to test her creative powers in the language she loved. She was mightily overwhelmed with joy when her book was published. Jhumpa Lahiri is often accused of being an autobiographical writer because of her setting and characters. She often refuses the charge of being autobiographical :

When I began to write, I thought that it was more virtuous to talk about others. I was afraid that autobiographical material was of less creative value, even a form of laziness on my part. I was afraid that it was egocentric to relate one's own experiences.¹⁷

According to Lahiri the writer always needs distance from his/her stories. But this book is really her autobiography of the learning process of Italian language. This book contains two stories and twenty-three chapters. Apart from the two stories, it's not a work of imagination. Even the stories bear the autobiographical references. Lahiri tells about the story *The Exchange*:

Even my first attempt at fiction in Italian, *The Exchange*, is autobiographical, I can't deny that. It's a story told in the third person, but the protagonist, slightly changed, is me.¹⁸

When the book was about to be published in English, Lahiri wasn't at all desirous to translate it herself. She wants someone with greater objectivity to translate it. Once having translated her presentation of Capri literary festival, she has come to understand that translation is not as easy as expected. She knows very well the limitations of her Italian and there might have been an urge to improve the book; had she herself translated it. English and Italian seems to be at conflict and she wanted to protect her Italian. Besides translating the book herself might have broken her literary discipline to read and write nothing but Italian. The language of the book is very easy going and musical. Sometimes it reads too poetical. The book is full of metaphors of all kind. Joseph Luzzi writes:

The exuberant tone may surprise readers used to understatement and quiet grace of Lahiri's acclaimed novels and short stories. And rightly so because, *In Other Words* presents the same author with a different voice.¹⁹

True to an autobiography the language is free flowing and spontaneous. Perhaps because of being new to the Italian language, the sentence structure of Lahiri is simple and not loaded with heavy adjectives and adverbs. Language is the theme of this book ; Italian language and its relationship with the author. In this book language is not only a tool to express the ideas and emotions of the author rather it is the subject matter of the book. The plot of the book is Lahiri's infatuation to the Italian language and her desire to learn it. It details her linguistic journey. But with Jhumpa Lahiri one cannot be very far way from the themes of exile, alienation, identity and belonging. Lahiri is adept at dealing with these themes. Describing the themes of the book Lahiri writes:

The themes, ultimately, are unchanged: identity, alienation, belonging.²⁰

In Other Words is Jhumpa Lahiri's fifth book. But in a certain manner it is her debut. It's her debut as an Italian writer. She describes this book as a 'linguistic autobiography' Joseph Luzzi comments about the book:

All the personal experiences are connected to linguistic ones, all the linguistic issues refracted through the author's life.²¹

The book ends at a cross roads, with Lahiri ready to leave Rome for America. She is not sure what will come of her affair with Italian. Being unknown to the language we cannot judge Lahiri's Italian language. All we can say whether this book reads good in English or not; whether we like the book or not. And this is sure that this book reads good in English. According to Lahiri, writing in another language represents an act of demolition of the self and a new beginning. Let's hope that her new beginning may lead her to new heights and end with one of her metaphors from the book:

In the animal world metamorphosis is expected, natural. It means a biological passage, including various specific phases that lead, ultimately, to complete development. When a caterpillar is transformed into a butterfly it's no longer a caterpillar but a butterfly. The effect of the metamorphosis is radical, permanent. The creature has lost its old form and gained a new, almost unrecognizable one. It has new physical feature, a new beauty, new capacities.²²

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