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Why This Metamorphosis?

Kaino Aye Rupantor?

Dwitiyo projonmer indo American sahityik, Jhumpa Lahiri, Pulitzer puroshkar peyechen tar golpo somogrho, Interpreter of Maladies er jonno. Tini, tar karmojibon e vyavsayik safylo orjon korechen, aar samalochokder theke swikriti peyechhen.

That was a brief introduction to Jhumpa Lahiri, in her mother-tongue, Bengali. I have chosen to introduce her in this manner to illustrate what it feels like to exist in what I have called the immigrant's middle-space—as my thesis will go on to explore.

Published in 1999, Lahiri's debut, in the form of award-winning short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, navigates ideas of the immigrant experience, love, longing and home. Several successes later, in a radical, mid-career shift, Lahiri decided to move away from the English language and immerse herself, intensely and completely, in the world of Italian. In doing so, she made herself into an immigrant, once more. The product of this wild choice was the unexpected memoir, *In Other Words* (2015), which explored the writer's dalliance with Italy and Italian. I am interested in Lahiri's work on the immigrant experience and on love, in general, and am also curious about her decision to take such a bold, artistic risk. Did she do so to feel at home, finally, in an America she never fully acclimatized to? Did she do it to realign herself with her art—or to make her work original and exciting, once more? Or, simply, just because as a *successful*, celebrated writer, she could?

In this essay, I will look at Lahiri's ideas of the immigrant experience through the lens of romantic love and cosmic loss. Her work suggests that as an immigrant, it is in the realm of discomfort, or, in spaces that are transitional—or middle-spaces—that healing, growth and beauty are best achieved. It is here that we, the immigrants, are able to make homes. To do this I will use the two aforementioned works, hoping to understand what Lahiri's fascination is with a love that is imperfect, big and complex, and how the sense of such a love informs her work on the immigrant experience. I will also investigate how Lahiri challenges traditional definitions of such middle-spaces by making them into realms of beauty and possibility, rather than those of pain and injustice—ideas they are normally associated with. In Lahiri's writing the middle space is a space that is marginal and otherworldly, characterized by an emotional environment that is in flux, and needing some kind of closure or care. These spaces are pivotal to her storytelling because they help dramatize, intensify and lend a certain vitality to the arc of her narratives, especially those of love. I also want to note that the middle-space, by definition, is ever-changing, volatile and non-conclusive—like the immigrant identity it attempts to work around.

A Quest For Closure

“A Temporary Matter” from *Interpreter of Maladies*, is the tale of a second-generation Massachusetts couple whose love is slowly decaying after their baby is stillborn. They learn, at the beginning of the story, that they will lose power every evening at eight p.m. for five consecutive days, due to some maintenance work—giving us the perfect middle-space to work with, in the form of a deep and disruptive darkness. The grieving wife, Shoba, comes up with the idea to use this time in the dark to share secrets. She is inspired by the power-cuts back home in India, and tells her husband Shukumar, “I remember during power failures at my grandmother's

house, we all had to say something;” thus shaping their evenings to be some kind of a game or challenge (Lahiri 49). Shukumar cooks for the occasion, with the care and patience only a lover possesses. Now, a couple who had nothing left to say to each other, is plunged into sharing intimate secrets, finally finding liberation in the night. It seems fitting how this quest for closure is aided by Shoba’s memories of home, or the context of India: this feels like a reassertion of her immigrant identity. The nightly power-outage becomes a middle-space where freedom and closure are found, after tragedy.

In the weeks after the tragedy, the couple have become gradually avoidant of one another in the home they share. In fact, the house becomes a location of isolation and hiding. Shukumar begins operating from a place of fear and anxiety around Shoba: “he feared that putting on a record in his own house might be rude” (25). Shoba, on the other hand, begins acting from a place of disregard and feigned nonchalance: “she treated the house as if it were a hotel” (29). Both parties seem unsure of how to face one another after experiencing a loss that is altogether bigger than them. Lahiri’s juxtaposition of the bleakness of their loss against beautifully romantic vignettes of their past creates a sense of dramatic discomfort, anxiety and grayness that characterizes their present. For example, when Shoba was expecting, the couple had a gathering of over a hundred people in their house—it was a time of such abundance and fulfillment that wine bottles had to be iced in the bathtub! A Shoba that is barely able to meet her husband’s eye in the present, then “kept [his] long fingers linked with hers” the entire night (39). For the world of Lahiri’s “A Temporary Matter,” the past then, is a realm of extravagance and a powerful love between two, whereas the present is sparse, uncomfortable and alienating. In the past there is always much to eat and drink, there is imagery of a potent romance that nudges readers in their chests, and importantly, there is hope. In the present, there are only painful silences and twisted

games. And then, in the form of a fated, cataclysmic darkness—but also, antithetically, a darkness that is routine, and home-like—a middle-space is chanced upon. As Laura Anh Williams points out in her essay on the collection: “Shukumar describes Shoba by contrasting her against the way she was before losing the baby. Primarily, these are observations of deficiency contrasted against surplus. He notes, “[s]he wasn't this way before” ”(6).

So, the conversations that are had when the lights go out, the secrets that are shared, can only happen under these very circumstances. I am interested in Lahiri’s choice to use this darkness as the healing zone for a relationship. There is a migration, here, from a normal way of life—a realm of discomfort that has to be walked through to find healing; a middle-space must be found or created. However, this middle-space must be “temporary” too, something to pass through, not stay forever in. It is a lens through which our characters can reimagine the relationship they share and the love that once was. These are characters that seem to know themselves and each other, are seemingly socially and professionally successful, and also seem to have a healthy relationship to their culture. There is always some connection to India, be it in the ever intricate meals that are being prepared, conservative in-laws that are dealt with, and for Shukumar, even in his academic research—which was “on agrarian revolts in India” (16). So, unlike the character trope of an Indian-American who is in denial of their *Indianness*, Lahiri creates characters who, although they inhabit America, seem to want to live in a middle-space between the two worlds they know. They, perhaps like Lahiri herself, want to stay immigrants, and are comfortable with the implications of such a multifaceted identity, which is a refreshing take on the immigrant experience. This multitudinous identity¹ is explored in a number of ways

¹Robin E. Field argues: “[T]he second generation exists in a liminal space of cultural borderlands...[they are] constantly negotiating their understanding of themselves, striving to balance, if not also integrate, their cultural roots and their American lifestyles. Yet as often as this group may celebrate having “two homelands”...it also experiences a dual alienation...” (166)

through the length of this tale. For instance, we come to know Shoba as someone who likes to prepare for every “ordinary emergency” (41). Shukumar notes that “[w]hen she used to do the shopping, the pantry was always stocked with extra bottles of olive and corn oil, depending on whether they were cooking Italian or Indian;” there was always plenty (31). Perhaps this is Shoba’s way of balancing out a life that exists primarily in middle-spaces.

Through Shoba’s game in the darkness and Shukumar’s elaborate meals, the couple are able to care for each other, for the last few times. It is fascinating how Lahiri leads us to believe that their relationship can be healed through this game in the dark. Instead, it turns out that Shoba has orchestrated this game only to be able to tell Shukumar that she is, in fact, leaving him! Shukumar retaliates from a place of hurt, telling her the one thing she takes solace in not knowing: the sex of their baby at birth. Each partner hurts the other irrevocably, but also offers much-needed closure and the hope for a new life, apart. Shoba must know this information to wholly and completely move on; however, Shukumar’s way of telling her is cruel. This is a blunt confirmation of the fact that they have outgrown one another, that they can no longer be kind to each other, like lovers are. He must hurt her in this way, so she knows she cannot come back to him. And so, for the last time in this middle-space, together, they “weep...for the things they [know]” (85).

Finding Home

In this short story from *Interpreter of Maladies*, “The Third and Final Continent,” immigration and ideas of home are dealt with in much more direct ways. This is the story of yet another Bengali immigrant who travels to several continents before settling down in America, and then into the marriage arranged for him. Here, there is an active seeking out of home, and a permanent

address. Our protagonist moves from one country to the next, sharing small spaces with several students, to living in YMCA's, to sharing the home of a hyperbolically old woman—Mrs. Croft—and then, finally, into the home of his marriage. He only develops a real interest in the life of his landlady when he realizes just how old she is, a hundred-and-three, a fact which slowly begins to affect his own life. Later, she is also the catalyst in his falling in love with his wife; her eventual death changes and leaves a huge mark on him. In my reading, perhaps it is Mrs. Croft, the first person our protagonist comes to truly know in America, who is the first person he ever loves. In the middle-spaces he occupies as a foreigner in America, and as guest in her home, he truly begins to belong.

The elderly woman seems in many ways to play the role of a strange soulmate to the young protagonist, both of whom are unaccustomed to the America—particularly Massachusetts—in which they are living. Mrs. Croft finds it hard to accept the changing nature of the world around her, and the new immigrant finds it challenging to adjust to such a new, fast-paced culture. In fact, they are both joined in their hesitation to fully assimilate into American culture of the later twentieth century. This is denoted by the protagonist's constant need to contextualize things in terms of his Indianness: “The backs of her legs were mapped with dark-blue veins, and her upper arms sagged like the flesh of a roasted eggplant” (612), he thinks. The narrator's metaphors, or manner of perceiving life around him are informed by his Indian heritage; roasted eggplant is a popular Bengali dish. So the two are versions of each other, and with time they develop a routine that works for them: everyday Mrs. Croft, the elderly landlady, asks the same question about Americans on the moon and he responds with the answer she desires. The two sometimes resemble—funnily—a married couple. And through this uncomfortable, ill-fitting and strange relationship, our protagonist first learns something about

love. Not a love that is cosmic or even romantic, but love as a thing that is informed by habit and getting used to—like a new city or country.

Food plays an important role in this story, too. It is a constant reminder of home—a constant reaching back to one’s roots that seems pivotal for the protagonist to sustain life in a foreign land. Food, again, is also a mode of communication. In fact, it is a language of love, whether in the form of his longing to prepare his landlady’s dinners to show care for her, or in his first ever words to his wife, Mala, upon her landing in America: “I did not embrace her, or kiss her, or take her hand. Instead I asked her, speaking Bengali for the first time in America, if she was hungry” (633). There is a period of transition here, too, where the perpetual-guest narrator now sheds this very role, becoming host, for the first time. There is a stranger in *his* home, now, that he must love and care for—and in this realm of discomfort, again, he learns a thing or two about love. What is fascinating is how the first time he is able to look at Mala with affection is in the home of Mrs. Croft: “I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft’s parlor as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen,” he recalls (648). Love, too, seems to be measured in terms of area or the “distance” two strangers must cover, to come to know one another. Tragedy plays a part in this tale too, and it is a result of that—Mrs. Croft’s death—that our protagonist is able to truly attempt to begin a life with his partner. The fact that he remains nameless feels like Lahiri’s attempt at pointing out the universality of the immigrant experience, of being some kind of stranger always.

Othering & The Hope of Romance

The title story of this collection, “Interpreter of Maladies,” is actually set in India, as an Indian-American family—the Das’—go sightseeing with Mr. Kapasi, their tour guide. What follows is

the development of an interesting relationship between Mrs. Das (or Mina) and the tour guide, when Mr. Kapasi tells the American family about his other job as interpreter at a doctor's office. Mr. Kapasi helps translate people's ailments from the local dialect into a language that the doctor can comprehend, which Mrs. Das, the tourist, perceives to be a "romantic" vocation (175). In response, Mr. Kapasi begins fantasizing about a dalliance with Mrs. Das, basking in her perception of him: "Her sudden interest in him, an interest she did not express in either her husband or her children, was mildly intoxicating," Lahiri writes (186). This infatuation stays potent until the pair gets a moment alone, and Mrs. Das reveals that one of her children, Bobby, is the product of infidelity. She wants Kapasi to diagnose her, to read into and attribute language to what she thinks of as her sickness. To her dismay, Kapasi just expresses his disappointment and points out her guilt, and his infatuation seems to melt away as quickly as it first developed, once he comes to know the truth about Mrs. Das. Once she is rendered flawed and human, the dreamscape of her dissipates, and she no longer captures his romantic interest—of course, if she was to be unfaithful to her husband, how could it be with anyone other than Mr. Kapasi himself!

In this short story, too, love is far from straightforward. In the middle-spaces of hidden conversations in Kapasi's car when the Das family is away, there is hope of some intimate connection. For Mrs. Das it is the intoxicating hope of clarity, mental calm and closure, while for Kapasi it is the hope of an exciting, romantic connection with someone who sees him and his profession as intellectual—something he does not get from his relationship with his wife. However, both parties seem to come at the connection from a selfish place, or for the *need* of something, failing to see the other as real. To each, the other is almost fictitious and two-dimensional, which is why love, or even a real connection, is impossible. Lahiri is interested in the subtle *othering* that occurs. It is non-traditional, dissimilar to an othering that takes place

across planes of racial difference. The process makes either character into something attractive, exciting and desirable to the other. To Kapasi, Mina holds the intrigue that a foreigner might, and he is drawn to her seemingly careless parenting and disregard for her family. The intrigue of a *bad* woman. To Mrs. Das, Kapasi is the exotic, romantic, homegrown man who may be able to put words to her ailment. Both characters fail to see each other as real and flawed individuals, but rather just escapes and departures from a stable, everyday life—a trip, a dalliance, a holiday!

There is also a clashing of identities here—although of Indian descent², and clearly involved in their culture and homeland, the Das family at the same time seems far removed from traditional, Indian sensibility. The othering must occur, then, as both parties attempt to understand and perceive one another in relation to themselves. The stark difference between the middle-class Indian man and the second-generation Indian-American becomes evident from the start of the tale, when Mrs. Das is catcalled on the street, in a tongue she cannot understand: “Mr. Kapasi heard one of the shirtless men sing a phrase from a popular Hindi love song as Mrs. Das walked back to the car, but she did not appear to understand the words of the song, for she did not express irritation, or embarrassment” (160). Lahiri’s intention with this scene is to show us how in her homeland, Mina is considered foreign. This scene is also especially intriguing if one considers Lahiri’s idea of Mina as the forever-traveler. Upon hearing that their journey still has more than two hours remaining, Mina sighs, “as if she had been traveling her whole life without pause” (163). Although this simile might be the writer’s attempt at painting a picture of Mrs.

²Field draws upon an important idea in relation to Lahiri's *The Namesake*, which I think applies more generally too, with my concerns: "The lives of other second generation immigrant Americans-is not a simple dichotomy of "being South Asian" with [other Indians] and "being American" with [fellow Americans]. Instead, [there] is [a constant] integrating and balancing [of] these cultural forces, creating and recreating [a sense of] identity based on [one's] personal needs." (168)

Das' exhaustion, there is some truth to it—is not this just the definition of being an immigrant, traveling one's entire life?

This sense of perpetual traveler also adds weight to Mina's affair with a friend of her husband, who also happens to be Indian. He, a Punjabi, meets Mina as he is in transit for a week, in their locale to attend some job interviews. Mina is longing for change and revitalization, and sleeps with her husband's friend for that very reason—a secret she has kept from everyone for eight years, until just now, when she lets it out to Kapasi. The friend is different from the husband, or at least that is how he is defined, by the things that make him unlike her husband Raj—the things that make him exciting. He represents a different *other*, still Indian, but poles apart culturally, from the Das'. An exhausted Mina, disillusioned by marriage and love, attempts to transcend everyday spaces to find beauty and to feel alive again. Although through this exciting dalliance she does, in a way, become new again, Mina has to live with its consequences in the form of guilt, and a child that her husband will never know the truth about. In this story, liberation is surely found through a middle-space, but it does not come without a cost.

In Other Words and The Always Foreigner

Lahiri's short stories show us the complications and beauties of loving an ever-evolving, never singular identity that is the immigrant's. They show us too, the subconscious need of the immigrant to always stay that way: evolving, moving, in transit. *In Other Words* is a departure from the visceral and intense stories of love and longing that I have considered from Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, but still, it is a story about love and immigration in other, more personal ways. It is a memoir, a diary that talks about Lahiri's radical decision to leave the comfort of English, and submerge herself in the pursuit and study of Italian—and to do so *wholeheartedly*.

It is a brave decision, new and exciting; much like falling in love. It is also necessary: Lahiri needs to make this radical shift, to move to Italy and abandon everything she knows, in order to realign herself with her art and to remember what it is she fell in love with the first place. I want to argue that away from the complicated politics and racisms of English, with the middle-space that is Italian, the writer is able to enter into “another life” (Lahiri), another facet of her identity, and make a home in it.

In an interview about her journey into the Italian language Lahiri asks: “[w]hat am I running away from, why this metamorphosis, why this escape, where do I have to get to, what am I trying to leave behind?” (Lahiri). It is interesting how Lahiri chooses to pose these questions to herself and the “I” in order to understand more about her art and her creative processes—she craves an understanding of her own need to change. “Why this metamorphosis” seems a particularly relevant concern for this thesis, and when it comes to the characters she writes, too. For instance, Shukumar in “A Temporary Matter” seems to almost constantly comment on Shoba’s changing behavior and the ways in which their relationship is undergoing metamorphosis post-tragedy. The journey of pregnancy, in fact, is an example of such a metamorphosis. In “The Third and Final Continent,” Mrs. Croft dislikes the changing and progressing nature of America, and the protagonist has only known an existence of constant change and migration, while Kapasi and Mina in “Interpreter of Maladies” are, in some ways, forever changed by their interaction. Lahiri migrates from the universal in *Interpreter of Maladies* to the personal in *In Other Words*, producing a work that is a literal testament to what it is to be never one thing. In its physical form, the memoir is a side-by-side translation—translated from Italian by Ann Goldstein. With the English text inhabiting the right side and Italian taking up the left pages of the book, it is as if these two parts or versions of Lahiri

acknowledge each other poignantly. It is striking how the presentation of this book ensures that we, as readers, are always reaching with our eyes to the top-left after a page turn, only to remember the humbling fact that we do not, in fact, understand. We glance upon the Italian pages ever so often out of habit, and are reminded that we are confined to the world of English, unlike Lahiri, who has broken free. We, are not allowed entry. She confronts us, quite literally and powerfully, with a barrier, through the physical act of our reading and receiving this book. *Look*,—it is as if she is saying—*look at what it feels like to be on the threshold, and not be able to enter.*

“I identify with the imperfect because a sense of imperfection has marked my life” (Lahiri 112), explains Lahiri of finding love and revitalization in an Italian that will, perhaps, never reach native proficiency. Rather than feeling defeated by this fact, or overwhelmed by Italian, the author finds in it the emotional abode that English and Bengali could never offer her, because “they have both been imposed” (Lahiri). To Italian she comes—much like one would to a new love—disarmed, honest and, most significantly, of her own accord. Lahiri knows, as an adult learning a foreign language, that her language will always remain a bit half-baked. However, this sense of its inevitable imperfection soothes and empowers her, like she and Italian are kindred spirits, who, in ideas of imperfection, find a connective tissue. And how she *falls*. “I’m bound to fail in it,” says the Lahiri, “but, unlike...my...failure in the past, this doesn’t torment or grieve me” (167). It is a productive failure, exciting and rejuvenating, pushing her—albeit inch by inch and with great effort—towards a language that is an “entire ocean, an entire world, an entire universe without bounds” (Lahiri). Perhaps the work she puts into learning Italian, the risk of being a stranger again, of starting over, the geographical and emotional migration—perhaps these are all middle-spaces Lahiri must inhabit as she attempts to learn this

new language. Perhaps Italian is the imperfect middle-space in itself. To Lahiri, the pursuit of Italian seems like the pursuit of love, and to love is to dwell, precariously, in a middle-space. It is a difficult love, which is why it captures the writer: “I feel exposed, vulnerable...An artist has to experience this condition. At some point I became a successful writer, and I’m grateful, but when I write, when I try to write, I always feel uncomfortable. You need to dig where you don’t feel comfortable” (Lahiri).

Because Lahiri had already overcome the struggle of having to prove herself in America, English became a thing of habit, and thereby no longer a middle-space of excitement and rejuvenation—so Lahiri needed to move on from it. Italian became the “uncomfortable” that she was looking for, the middle-space she needed to travel to and drown in, in order to fall back into love with her art. It became the lover that reminded her of her first and most important love: writing. Italian made Lahiri an immigrant³ again; the very identity that, arguably, gave her much of the fiber that would become her writing. To feel realigned with her art Lahiri needed to feel realigned with the self—and the parts of her that are always in transit. By making herself into an immigrant again, she is able to do this. She is also able to exercise radical agency by *othering* herself, this time, rather than being put in a box by the world, labelled either “Indian-American writer,” “second-generation immigrant writer” or “POC writer” and so on. In this way, Italian becomes her rebellion, and at the same time, a home of her choosing, not one she is born into. It is a reminder of the purity and honesty of her intention—she is here not because she has to be, but because she chooses to:

³Min Zhou argues that “many second-generation Asian-Americans, who are considered assimilated, are still subjected to a pernicious system of racial stratification. One second-generation Chinese-American described the discrimination she has faced: “The truth is, no matter how American you think you are or try to be, if you have almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default” (152).

Italian is the language I have chosen: I cannot say “foreign”, because when I speak and read in Italian I feel at home. I feel this strong sense of belonging, even if it’s not real because I’m not Italian. Italian does not belong to me completely, and yet it belongs to me because it’s a relationship I have chosen and strongly wanted. The problem with English and Bengali is that they have both been imposed. While Italian is an unusual path, an unexpected one, and comes from me only. (Lahiri)

There is a fascinating tension here in Lahiri’s wonderings—what does it mean to “belong” to a language? Who decides if such a connection is “real” or not? Do her feelings of being an imposter in the world of this new language come from an insecurity only the immigrant knows of? A middle-space we will forever be trapped in? Do things only belong to us, I am wondering, if we are born into them? Why cannot Italian belong to Lahiri wholly and “completely,” if she has *chosen* to leave everything behind, just to study and to love it so?

Through the journey of *In Other Words*, Lahiri puts herself through the migrations and loves of her characters. She makes herself an in-between, and comes alive in it: “If it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language” (95). If there was no mess, no discomfort of the middle-space, Lahiri is saying, then the risk would hardly be worth it and liberation, unfound. “[Y]ou can’t float without the possibility of drowning...[t]o know a new language, to immerse yourself, you have to leave the shore” (5). Without the commitment of going all in—no floats, fully cognizant of the possibility of drowning—there is no art, no love. Without the *biggest* creative risk, perhaps Lahiri is saying, there will never be the biggest art. There will be only one Lahiri—confined to what she knows and how she is known—and perhaps too, not even the real Lahiri. Maybe what makes her who she is, is the complication of her identity, the “overabundant” layers of it, and the earnest promise to never be satiated in the words and worlds she has come to know.

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