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CULTURAL TRANSLATION OF WOMAN: JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE NAMESAKE*

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ABSTRACT

Cultural translation is the phenomenon of texts moving from one language to another in translation studies. Homi Bhabha treats cultural translation in a different way in his book *Location of Culture*. It is the movement of a person from one language-cultural context to another is translation. He is exploiting the meaning of the word "translation". Bhabha considers human migration also as translation. According to Bhabha he himself translated. Jhumpa Lahiri, an immigrant from West Bengal also like Rushdie and her novel *The Namesake* discusses certain issues which can be studied under the title cultural translation. *The Namesake's* protagonist Ashima like Lahiri becomes a culturally translated woman.

Keywords: Cultural translation, Language, Culture, Migration

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Translation was identified as a kind of activity which inevitably involved at least two languages and two cultural traditions. The translators were faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in a source text and of finding the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in the target language. These problems varied depending on the languages and cultures under consideration. If each language has unique quality then theoretically it is impossible to translate a text embedded in a particular culture. Bassnett in *Translation Studies* says

Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril. (22)

But we do see translations and texts moving from one language to another. Translators come with certain methods to translate culturally-bound words and expressions. Here comes the significance of cultural translation. The phenomenon of texts moving across from one language-culture to another is considered as cultural translation in translation studies. But Homi Bhabha in his *Location of Culture* deals with cultural translation in a quite different sense that is the movement of a person from one language-cultural context to

another as translation. He uses the term "translation" not to describe a transaction between texts and languages but in the sense of being carried across from one place to another.

Bhabha was born into a Parsi family from Mumbai. He is one of the most important figures in contemporary post colonial studies. He has coined a number of terms and key concepts. It includes hybridity, mimicry, difference and ambivalence. These terms describe the ways in which colonised people resisted the coloniser. His published *Location of Culture* in 1991. In it he uses the concepts to argue about cultural production. The new treatment of the term cultural translation occurs in Homi Bhabha's last chapter of *Location of Culture*, titled "How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trials of cultural translation".

Bhabha takes Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* for the discussion of the topic. Rushdie himself remarked, "We are translated men" (qtd by Trivedi 4). Here he is exploiting the meaning of the word "translation", which means to carry across.

Bhabha takes the character Chamcha from *The Satanic Verses* and says

For Chamcha stands, quite literally, in-between two border conditions. On the one hand lies his landlady Hindu who espouses the cause of gastronomic pluralism, devouring the spiced dishes of Kashmir and the yogurt sauces of Lucknow, turning herself into the wide land mass of the subcontinent itself 'because food passes across any boundary you care to mention'. On Chamcha's other side sits his landlord Sufyan, the secular 'colonial' metropolitan who understands the fate of the migrant in the classical contrast between Lucretius and Ovid. (224)

Migration from one place to other will bring difference, but it is difficult to decide whether the crossing of cultural frontiers gives freedom from "the essence of self" or migration only changes "the surface of the soul" (Bhabha 224). Bhabha means by translation human migration and he discusses how Western multiculturalism is brought about by Third World migration. He considers hybridity also as cultural translation. This distinctly postmodernist idea of cultural translation is first articulated by Bhabha. It is a non-textual and non-linguistic sense of the term. He uses it to describe the condition of the contemporary world, a world in which millions migrate and change their location every day. He finds that translation is the only possible way to transform the world and bring about something politically new. He says

This liminality of migrant experience is no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one, there is no resolution to it because the two conditions are ambivalently enjoined in the 'survival' of migrant life. (224)

The upper class migration to the First World from the Third World creates multiculturalism in the Western world. The migrated ones represent their country through the new language. Those people who remain still in their own country and speak their own language lose relevance. The languages of a nation like India lose their value in the presence of English.

For instance, if we take the case of Jhumpa Lahiri, which is not quite different from that of Rushdie who was born of Bengali parents in London and grew up in America. She was the daughter of Indian immigrants from West Bengal. Her family moved to United States when she was two. She grew up in Kingston, Rhode Island. Her mother wanted her children to grow up knowing Bengali heritage. So their family often visited the relatives of Calcutta. She has written stories about Indians. She admits that her knowledge about India is limited and her works are like translations. She is not able to read her own books' translations into Bengali (Trivedi 5-6).

In 1999, Lahiri published her first short story collection entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. It dealt with the issues of Indians or Indian immigrants, including their generation. She published another collection of short stories called *Unaccustomed Earth* in 2008. With this collection, Lahiri broke from her previous literary focus on first-generation Indian immigrants to the United States and their family problems. The stories in *Unaccustomed Earth* focus on the second and third generations of immigrants and their assimilation into the culture of the United States. Other books by Lahiri are *The Namesake*, and *The Magic Barrel*. Her books explore the family lives and the identity crisis faced by immigrants, especially their children. She is an excellent

writer deals with the major theme of problem of immigrants which she felt in her own life. she is Indian but lived in America so she faced the problem of immigrants which she tries to show in her work.

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel is *The Namesake* (2003). *The Namesake* tells the journey of an Indian couple, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli as they join together through the tradition of arranged marriage and quickly emigrate from Calcutta to Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although Ashoke is able to adjust rather easily into American lifestyle, Ashima struggles to live in foreign land. Jhumpa Lahiri was born Nilanjana Sudehna Lahiri, but uses her nickname Jhumpa. She herself was bit unhappy over her name and chose to be known by her nickname, Jhumpa, as it was easier to pronounce. This was the inspiration for her novel, *The Namesake*.

In the novel Ashoke and Ashima have a son and his naming become problematic. When Ashima gives birth to her first child, the first major cultural conflict is revealed over the naming of their son. After much trouble and deliberation, they decide to name him Gogol. Gogol is Ashoke's favorite Russian author, who is also said to play an important part in the saving of Ashoke's life during a terrible accident years earlier

Gogol also gets two names. The cultural tradition of Bengal is quite different from Cambridge. The novel says, "Names can wait. In India parents take their time. It wasn't unusual for years to pass before the right name, the best possible name was determined" (25). But the Bengali couple is in trouble, "For they learn that in America, a baby cannot be released from the hospital without a birth certificate. And the birth certificate needs a name" (27). The child's mother Ashima is in a conflict. But she is forced accept the change between places. Like Rushdie's character Chamcha, she is in two worlds.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a culturally translated woman. Lahiri's characters also reflect such change. Ashoke's wife Ashima is the perfect example. The novel is about the cultural conflict experienced by Ashima Ganguli over thirty years (1968-2000). Lahiri says, "But nothing feel normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all" (5). She is the heart of the story. Through her we really come to understand the feelings of alienation and cultural shock.

Ashima is a culturally conservative personality. She misses her home and country in the foreign land. She has no friends in Cambridge in the beginning. In Calcutta, she would have had a lot of people always around her. In Cambridge, Ashima is surrounded by strangers. Everything is new to her in Cambridge. Ashima in the novel is like Lahiri who is culturally translated. Here is an example for her translation. One day she cries when she understands that there is not enough rice to cook:

She calls Ashoke at his department to ask him to pick up the rice on his way home. This time, when there is no answer, she gets up, washes her face and combs her hair. She changes and dresses Gogol and puts him into the navy blue white-wheeled pram inherited from Alan and Judy. For the first time, she pushes him through the balmy streets of Cambridge, to Purity Supreme, to buy a bag of white long-grain rice. (34)

Ashima's husband dies. Her children grow up and move to their own worlds. She feels loneliness. She wants to return to India. But we are surprised to find out that she now thinks of Calcutta as foreign. She is culturally translated. Now the alien place become home to her. She with her husband lived there. She gave birth to her children there. Most of the memorable events of her life happened in the foreign land. It shows Ashima once homesick has grown accustomed to life in the States. She has accepted her daughter's fiancé and she understands why Gogol divorced Moushumi. She has even managed to make a few American friends, through her job at the library. India used to be her home. But now it becomes another world to her. Ashima changes her heart.

Ashima is no longer completely Bengali, but she hasn't become an American either. But she is at peace with her plight. No more cries. Lahiri says,

Ashima has decided to spend six months of her own life in India, six months in the States.... True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere. (276)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* provides an incredible insight into the life of one girl from India as she struggles to find balance between two very different cultures from one generation to the next. Throughout the book,

differences in families from American culture and Indian culture are explored. It won critical fame for its graceful detailing of lives translated from India to America. The novel presents the cultural dilemmas and cultural displacement of the Bengali couple. Their identity also becomes problematic. They always live in two worlds.

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