

Postcolonial Literature

Lecture 16

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Hello everyone and welcome back to yet another lecture on postcolonial literature. Today we will again pick up the notion of belonging simultaneously to multiple cultural traditions which we discussed in our previous lecture while talking about cosmopolitanism. And in today's lecture, we will explore this idea of multiple cultural affiliation with reference to diasporic literature. The category of diasporic literature today forms an integral part of postcolonial literary studies, and in order to understand this category better I think we need to start from the meaning of the word diasporic.

What is “diaspora”?

“Diasporic” is an adjective derived from the noun diaspora which has its roots in the Greek language. The word in its Greek form means dispersing or scattering and it originally referred to the scattering or dispersal of seeds during the process of sowing. However, today the primary understanding of diaspora relates to the dispersion of people rather than seeds and this specific association can be traced back for instance to the Book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament of the Bible. Thus, Chapter 28 verse 25 of Deuteronomy uses the Greek root word of diaspora to describe how, if the commands of the God are not obeyed, then the God will cause the disobedient people to be defeated by their enemy and cause them to be dispersed among all the kingdoms of the earth. It is important to note here that in this early instance which talks about diaspora as a dispersion of a human communities, the idea of diaspora is closely associated with the notion of exile or of being removed from one's homeland, as a form of punishment.

This connection between exile and diaspora most strongly resonates in the history of the Jewish community, which was banished from its homeland in the sixth century BCE after the holy city of Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. This exile still informs the cultural memory of the Jewish diaspora, or the Jewish people who live in different parts of the world dispersed from their homeland. And this sense of exile within the Jewish diaspora is closely entwined with a nostalgia for the lost homeland and a desire to return to it. All these emotional and cultural associations today shape our understanding of the term diaspora, and before I go on to discuss how diaspora relates to the postcolonial literature I would like to reiterate them for a better understanding. Firstly, diaspora refers to communities of people

living away from what they consider to be their homelands. Secondly, this state of living away from the homeland bears the negative connotation of being in exile. And finally, the feeling of being in exile evokes within the diasporic community a sense of nostalgic longing for a lost homeland and a desire to return. Now keeping in mind this general characterisation of diaspora and diasporic identity let us see how it is related to postcolonialism, which is our main concern in this course.

Colonialism and Diaspora

As discussed at the very beginning of this lecture series, colonialism connects the two distinct spaces of the metropolis and the colony through a constant traffic of goods, capital and most importantly of people. So in other words human dispersions and formations of diasporic communities are integral to the process of colonialism. In our previous lectures we have already discussed a bit about the white man who comes to the colony from the metropolis, and here I am thinking about characters like Marlow in *The Heart of Darkness* or even the Christian missionaries as described in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In our discussion of diaspora and diasporic literature today we will take up the opposite kind of migration and dispersion which resulted from colonialism. This is the dispersion of the colonised subjects from their homelands, and their migration to the colonial metropolis. However, it is important to remember that not every dispersion of the colonised subjects from their homelands meant a gathering in the metropolis. Many people were simply displaced during colonialism from one part of the colonial periphery to another – for instance the dispersion of slaves and indentured labourers from Africa and India to colonial plantations like the Caribbean islands. Indeed, we have already touched upon this particular kind of migration when we discussed Derek Walcott. Walcott, if you remember, is the legacy bearer of the African diasporic community who gathered in the Caribbean during the days of slavery. After slavery was banned during the early nineteenth century, indentured labourers took their places. The Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh in his *Ibis* trilogy describes in details how these indentured labourers were gathered from various parts of India using different degrees of coercion and persuasion and then shipped to distant colonial plantations to work as bonded labourers. For example, the ancestors of the Nobel prize winning author VS Naipaul migrated to Trinidad from northern India to work in the sugar plantations and in various writings of Naipaul we get a vivid glimpse into the ways of life of diasporic community of Indians that started taking shape in the Caribbean from nineteenth century.

However, these dispersions of the colonised subjects within the colonial periphery was also supplemented by significant waves of migrations that reached from the colonies to the metropolis. Let us take for instance the relation between metropolitan Britain and colonised India. Indians started arriving Britain from as early as the seventeenth century, primarily as servants employed by British households but also as sailors, diplomats and savants. One of the most interesting Indian migrants to Britain during this early period was a man called Sake Dean Mohammad. Dean Mohammad was born in Bihar in 1759 and migrated to Britain in 1782, and there he introduced shampoo baths and Indian cuisine while also became the first Indian author to publish a book in English. This book which was published in 1794 was titled *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* and it is simultaneously regarded as the first major work of Indian English literature and of Indian diasporic literature written in English.

The groups of servants, sailors and diplomats were soon supplemented and then almost entirely overshadowed by the population of Indian students who started arriving in Britain from India from around the 1840s, and it is interesting to note that many Indian nationalist leaders like MK Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru and BR Ambedkar received their higher education from Britain. These various waves of migration from the colonial periphery to the mother country established a number of diasporic communities within the metropolis. And the category “diasporic literature” refers to the literature produced by these displaced people who migrated from the colonial periphery in the global South to the metropolitan centres in the global North. And we need to note here that these metropolitan centres not only include places like Britain, France and Spain, but also America, which in many ways have inherited the mantle of the colonial West.

Jhumpa Lahiri

As a literature that reflects the displaced condition of its author, diasporic literature is, expectedly, informed by the pangs of exile and a nostalgic desire to reunite with the homeland, and this sense of exile and nostalgia forms the keynote uniting the otherwise wide variety of diasporic literature produced in Britain, France, Spain and America by people who have migrated from India, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean islands. In our lecture today, we will read a story by Jhumpa Lahiri to have a closer look at these key concepts of exile and nostalgia for the homeland that informs the diasporic condition in general and diasporic literature in particular.

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1969 in London to Bengali parents who had migrated from Calcutta. But she was raised primarily in the east coast of the United States where her parents shifted when she was two. More recently, Lahiri has shifted base once again and she now resides in Rome, Italy. Lahiri's diasporic identity has created for her a unique location in the interstices of different cultures and she identifies herself as writing from a position of marginality where the limits of these various cultures meet. For instance, although born to Bengali parents, Lahiri tells us that her knowledge of Bengali is only partial and this sense of lack has informed her cultural identity. On the other hand though Lahiri was brought up in America, the desire to keep alive her connection with her Bengali roots meant that she could only partially assimilate herself within America. Lahiri's move to Italy has only accentuated this sense of being a marginal entity who does not fully belong to any particular culture and cannot firmly identify any one place as her home.

This sense of being without a fixed cultural as well as spatial home strongly informs all of Jhumpa Lahiri's works, be it her novels like *The Namesake* or *The Lowland*, or her celebrated collection of short stories like *Interpreter of Maladies* or *Unaccustomed Earth*. But whereas the state of being an exile informs Lahiri's writings with a sense of lack and loss, it also informs them with a tremendous sense of multi-cultural possibilities. The diasporic condition situates a writer like Lahiri at the margins of different places and different cultures but by doing so also allows herself to uniquely blend elements of different cultures to produce a self-identity that is cosmopolitan and eclectic. By freeing oneself from the confines of one homeland and one native culture, the condition of being an exile makes a person an heir to all cultures. Such a stance is evident for instance in Lahiri attempt to learn Italian, the language of the country that she now resides in, and make it her own. Her latest book, *In Altre Parole*, written in Italian and translated in English under the title *In Other Words* is an account of this difficult and rewarding attempt to appropriate for herself a language and culture to which she was neither born nor exposed to while growing up.

Jhumpa Lahiri's life and literature shows the cultural possibilities that the condition of being born and brought up in a diaspora throws up, but Lahiri is also keenly aware of the sense of alienation that this condition entails. The migration from one's homeland can make one an heir to multiple cultures but it can also as easily shut one out from all sense of cultural rootedness. The claustrophobic sense of a cultural vacuum that a migration from the homeland can create for an individual is beautifully depicted in Lahiri's story titled "Mrs Sen's" collected in the Pulitzer prize winning book *Interpreter of Maladies* and it is to this story that we will now turn.

Mrs Sen's

This story, narrated by an American boy named Eliot, tells of the time that he spent with his Bengali babysitter Mrs Sen. Mr Sen had arrived in America with a job to teach mathematics in a university and had brought his wife along with him. But this migration has meant for Mrs Sen a painful uprooting from her familiar Bengali socio-cultural milieu and most importantly from her family. To fill the sense of lack that the loss of her homeland creates for Mrs Sen, she tries to cling on to the memory of the tiniest details that gave substance to her life back in Calcutta — which she still wistfully referred to as her “home”. In America, Mrs Sen tries to recreate that “home” by repeatedly rereading the letters that she occasionally receives from her friends back in Calcutta, by listening to the familiar sounds of Indian classical music and the voices of her relatives in a cassette player, and most importantly by cooking of Bengali food. Yet this very attempt to live the memories of Calcutta in America and transform an American space into a Bengali home creates for Mrs Sen a cocoon like isolation that is cut off from the immediate reality outside. Mrs Sen's failure to come to terms with America, and her conflict with the new physical reality of this foreign land is exposed in the story through references to Mrs Sen's inability to drive on American roads. And the tension between the Bengali inner reality that Mrs Sen creates within her apartment and the outside reality of the American roads reach a breaking point when one day she decides to drive herself to a fish shop. With Eliot sitting by her side, Mrs Sen takes a wrong turn and meets with a minor accident. As a consequence, Eliot's mother stops sending him to Mrs Sens, and the last thing Eliot remembers of his Bengali baby-sitter is the sound of crying coming out of the bedroom of her apartment within which Mrs Sen had locked herself in.

In a way, Mrs Sen, with her inability to break free from the mental cocoon of a remembered homeland and her subsequent psychological breakdown in the midst of a new socio-cultural and physical terrain, represents the opposite of Jhumpa Lahiri -- the diasporic author who is confident in her ability to appropriate and make her own elements from disparate cultures. But the very fact that Lahiri creatively engages with characters like Mrs Sen, shows a desire to recognise and address the difficulty that a migrant faces in connecting with the outside reality following displacement and uprooting. The isolation of Mrs Sens apartment and the sound of sobbing that comes out of her bedroom thus forms the dark underside of the diasporic condition which is otherwise marked by the luminosity of eclectic cultural possibilities.

With this exploration of Jhumpa Lahiri and her work we conclude our discussion on diasporic literature today. In our next meeting we will take up the writings of Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak. Thank you.