

Routes to their roots: Indian Diaspora in Salman Rushdie's "The courter" and Jhumpa Lahiri's "The interpreter of maladies"

Caminho das Índias: a diáspora indiana em
"The courter", de Salman Rushdie, e
"The interpreter of maladies", de Jhumpa Lahiri

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ABSTRACT: This work aims at discussing the fictional representation of Indian subjects in the short stories "The Courter" and "The interpreter of Maladies", by Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri correspondingly. Rushdie and Lahiri's short stories seem to converse with each other in the sense that they depict "the plight of those who are torn between motherlands and mother tongues". Accordingly, this discussion will consider the similarities and differences between the multiple journeys Rushdie and Lahiri's characters partake and the implication of such episodes in their lives. Thus, the main objective of this article is to especially consider the way these characters negotiate with the clash of belonging to two cultures: the East (India) and the West (England, in "The Courter", and the U.S., in "The Interpreter of Maladies"), which happens to be one of the most striking aspects of the immigrant experience.

KEYWORDS: immigrant writing; diaspora; India; Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri.

RESUMO: Este trabalho visa discutir a representação ficcional de sujeitos diaspóricos indianos nos contos "The Courter" e "The Interpreter of Maladies", de Salman Rushdie e Jhumpa Lahiri respectivamente. Os contos "The Courter" e "The Interpreter of Maladies" parecem dialogar um com o outro, já que, aparentemente, espelham "a dor daqueles que se encontram divididos entre terras natais e línguas maternas". Nesse sentido, esta discussão promoverá comparações entre as similaridades e as diferenças por meio das múltiplas jornadas feitas pelas personagens de Rushdie e Lahiri e a implicação destes episódios em suas vidas. Com isso, o principal objetivo deste artigo é, especialmente, analisar as formas em que as personagens diaspóricas dos contos de Rushdie e Lahiri agenciam o embate de pertencerem a duas culturas, o Leste (a Índia) e o Oeste (a Inglaterra, em "The Courter", e os Estados Unidos da América, em "The Interpreter of Maladies"), uma vez que tais questões parecem ser um dos aspectos mais proeminentes da condição do imigrante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: escrita imigrante; diáspora; Índia; Salman Rushdie; Jhumpa Lahiri.

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1 Introduction

Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri's fictional short stories, "The Courter" and "The Interpreter of Maladies" respectively, seem to converse with each other in the sense that they depict "the plight of those who are torn between mother-lands and mother tongues" (Iyer, 1993, p. 46). They fall on the question of subjects negotiating with the clash of two cultures: the East (India) and the West (England, in "The Courter", and the United States, in "The Interpreter of Maladies") and its implications in their lives, which happens to be one of the most striking aspects of the immigrant experience.

Rushdie and Lahiri argue about the double perspective immigrants supposedly acquire due to immigration: what it means to be an insider and outsider when building a new "world" together with the old one in their heart (Rushdie, 1991). Moreover, both authors discuss the question of immigrants being taken as "not quite" (Iyer, 1993) through different routes: Rushdie portrays the story of a family that comes from the East and the way they get by in the West. Lahiri, nonetheless, describes the story of the adult children of Indian immigrants, who were born in the U.S., and their trip to India to get acquainted to the country where their family comes from. Thus, by narrating such episodes with an emphasis on the characters' experiences in the context of immigration, Rushdie and Lahiri deal with threshold spaces, those liminal territories with plenty possibilities of movement and displacement, ultimately producing the characters' condition of uprootedness (Almeida, 2008).

2 Routes to their Roots

In Rushdie's "The Courter", the narrator reports the story of his family from Bombay immigrating to London, "[...] where we all lived for a time in the early Sixties in a block called Waverley House [...]" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 177). He is reminded of his late teenage years after receiving a letter from Aya, the woman who took care of him as well as his family during the time they lived in London: "[...] [t]his message from an intimate stranger reached out to me in my enforced exile from the beloved country of my birth and moved me, stirring things that had been buried very deep" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 178).

The narrator was already living in London for over a year when his father decided to take the whole family to England. They lived in the aforementioned address, where other Indians lived as well: "[...] [t]his was Waverley House in Kensington Court, W8. Among the other residents were not one but two Indian Maharajas, the sporting Prince P- as well as the old B- [...]" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 182). In this setting, Aya and Mecir, other two important characters from Rushdie's short story, are introduced: Mecir addresses Aya as 'Certainly-Mary' "[...] because she never said plain yes or no; always this O-yes-certainly or no-certainly-not" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 176). Furthermore, Aya's linguistic abilities in English are very limited as she has problems in pronouncing certain letters in the English language and, sometimes, mixes them up.

Mecir, on the other hand, is the porter who works in the building where the narrator's family live. He is addressed in two different forms: the narrator and his siblings nicknamed him 'Mixed-Up' because they were not sure how to say his real name – Mishirsh. Aya, due to her English pronunciation, called him 'courter': "[...] [s]o, thanks to her unexpected, somehow

stomach-churning magic, he was no longer porter, but courter” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 177). It is in this environment that Rushdie’s fictional family from Bombay carries on in England.

As far as Lahiri’s “The Interpreter of Maladies” goes, Mr. Kapasi is a driver who was assigned to drive Mr. and Mrs. Das and their children in their visit to India. Mr. Das (Raj) and Mrs. Das (Mina) were born in the United States, but happened to be the children of Indian immigrants in the U.S.: “[...] [o]h, Mina and I were both born in America,” Mr. Das announced with an air of sudden confidence. “Born and raised. Our parents live here now, in Assansol. They retired. We visit them every couple of years [...]” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 45). Mr. Kapasi takes the American family to sightsee in India. During their car journey, Lahiri’s characters start a conversation in which they get to know a little more about each other. Mr. Kapasi finds out that Raj (Mr. Das) is a middle school teacher in the U.S., and Mina (Mrs. Das) is a full-time mother, who takes care of their three children: Ronny, Bobby, and Tina. Mr. Kapasi happens to have another job as well:

I give tours on Fridays and Saturdays only. I have another job during the week.”

“Oh? Where?” Mr. Das asked.

“I work in a doctor’s office.”

“You’re a doctor?”

“I am not a doctor. I work with one. As an interpreter.”

“What does a doctor need an interpreter for?”

“He has a number of Gujarati patients. My father was Gujarati, but many people do not speak Gujarati in this area, including the doctor. And so the doctor asked me to work in his office, interpreting what the patients say (Lahiri, 1999, p. 50).

From the conversation cited above in Mr. Kapasi’s car, Mina develops a different feeling towards him: she becomes interested in Mr. Kapasi’s job as an interpreter and, in the end of the short story, Mina wants him to interpret her most intimate confidence: she has never told anyone that Bobby, her second child, is not her husband’s. Mrs. Das wants Mr. Kapasi to help her cope with the anguish of hiding this secret from her family.

As one has noticed so far, Rushdie and Lahiri’s characters come from different backgrounds, and, for that matter, acquire different perceptions of their diasporic condition. As Avtar Brah has discussed in her essay entitled “Diaspora, Border and transitional identities”, “[...] the word [diaspora] embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a ‘home’ from where the dispersion occurs. It evokes images of multiple journeys” (Brah, 1996, p. 181). The characters in Rushdie and Lahiri’s short stories also experience multiple journeys: in the former, the family leaves Bombay to live in England for a while. After a time in London, the narrator’s father decides to take up residency in Pakistan with all his family. Concerning the latter, the couple brings their children to sightsee in India and visit their grandparents. Additionally, the couple’s parents have taken several journeys: they immigrated to the U.S., raised their children and, after retiring, decided to return to India. Thus, “[...] all diasporas are differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in a common ‘we’” (Brah, 1996, p. 184). For this reason, even when dealing with Indian subjects, one is able to notice the specificities of their experiences. Moreover, as Almeida (2008) states

Mobile identities both affect and are affected by transnational movements, and in turn transform not only the subjects who cross borders but also those who remain rooted. It thus becomes possible to speak [...] of hybrid identities and multiple affiliations that define subjects [...] in a constant motion, in an ongoing process of being-in-the-world. These subjects embody a form of transitory citizenship, reflecting a positionality that situates them within a specific spatial context – local, yet simultaneously shifting and transnational (Almeida, 2008, p. 12)¹.

In relation to the experiences of the family in Rushdie's "The Courter", the linguistic barrier is something that brings the immigrants from the building at Waverley House together. Mecir (Mixed-Up) had a stroke and was not able to communicate effectively with the other residents, whereas Aya (Certainly-Mary) could not pronounce words in English correctly. In addition, the narrator's father and mother misinterpreted some English words and expressions; and, for his own disappointment, the narrator himself could not perform easily in British English:

[...] It wasn't just Certainly-Mary and my parents who had trouble with the English language. My schoolfellows tittered when in my Bombay way I said I said "brought-up" for upbringing (as in 'where was your brought-up?') and "thrice" for three times and "quarter-plate" for side-plate and 'macaroni' for pasta in general (Rushdie, 1994, p. 185).

In his essay entitled "Imaginary Homelands", Salman Rushdie states that the linguistic struggle immigrants undergo reflects other struggles in real life: the struggle between two cultures within themselves (Rushdie, 1991, p. 16). This is what happens to the family from Bombay in England: they have to cope with two worlds: the place they are from and the place they inhabit and are always reminded "they can be 'in' Britain but not 'of' Britain" (Brah, 1996, p. 191).

Similarly, the language issue plays an important role in Lahiri's "The Interpreter of Maladies". Mr. Kapasi, the driver, wanted to be a translator when he was young. He devoted time to study foreign languages as "[...] he had dreamed of being an interpreter for diplomats and dignitaries, resolving conflicts between people and nations, settling disputes of which he alone could understand both sides" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 52). Nevertheless, Mr. Kapasi ends up as a cicerone for foreign tourists due to his ability to speak English, which was the only non-Indian language he could speak fluently (Lahiri, 1999, p. 52). In India, his job of interpreting people's maladies seemed not to have great importance. His wife never acknowledged what he did in the doctor's office was a big responsibility and "[...] had little regard for his career as an interpreter" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 53). Conversely, Mrs. Das (Mina) got interested in his job and even described it as 'romantic'. She was able to figure the extent of dependability others had on him:

¹ as identidades móveis afetam e são afetadas pelos movimentos transnacionais e, por sua vez, modificam os sujeitos que se movem além das fronteiras, bem como aqueles que se encontram enraizados. Torna-se possível, então, falar [...] de identidades híbridas e afiliações múltiplas que definam os sujeitos, [...], em um movimento constante, em um processo contínuo de estar no mundo. Esses sujeitos são detentores de uma cidadania transitória, refletindo um posicionamento que os situa em relação a um contexto espacial específico, local, mas ao mesmo tempo movente e transnacional (Almeida, 2008, p. 12).

“So these patients are totally dependent on you,” Mrs. Das said. [...] “In a way, more dependent on you than the doctor.”

“How do you mean? How could it be?”

“Well, for example, you could tell the doctor that the pain felt like a burning, not straw. The patient would never know what you had told the doctor, and the doctor wouldn’t know that you had told the wrong thing. It’s a big responsibility” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 51).

After this conversation, Mr. Kapasi realizes the importance of his job as an interpreter and starts to notice how different his perception on what he does and the way he and people from India’s lives differ from the Das’. Curiously, the experiences of the main characters in “The Courter” and “The Interpreter of Maladies” reveal their expectations towards England and India / the U.S. correspondingly, and either shatter or enhance stereotypes previously built by the West and East cultures. Mr. Kapasi, in Lahiri’s “The Interpreter of Maladies”, perceived that even though Mr. and Mrs. Das looked Indian, they behaved in a very different way from Indians themselves:

The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly colored clothing and caps with translucent visors. [...] When he’d introduced himself, Mr. Kapasi had pressed his palms together in greeting, but Mr. Das squeezed hands like an American so that Mr. Kapasi felt it in his elbow (Lahiri, 1999, p. 44).

Not only the way they greeted others was different from Indians. Mr. Kapasi noticed that Mina’s children would rarely call her ‘mommy’ and would address her by her first name. The way they spoke English was also remarkable: “[...] their accents sounded like the ones Mr. Kapasi heard on American television programs, though not like the ones on *Dallas*” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 49). Additionally, Mr. and Mrs. Das looked too young and did not seem to be the parents of their children: “[...] it seemed that they were in charge of the children only for the day; it was hard to believe they were responsible for anything other than themselves” (Lahiri, 1999, p. 49).

Concerning Rushdie’s “The Courter”, the immigrant family from Bombay went through a difficult period for immigrants in London. They seemed not to be welcomed and were made aware of such a feeling: “[...] a vulpine English man with a thin moustache and mad eyes declaimed [on the TV news] a warning about immigrants [...]” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 189). The narrator’s family lived in a building with other Indians who also behaved very differently from them:

This is what has lasted in my memory of Waverley House, [...]; Maharaja of P–roaring away towards London’s casinoland every night, in the red sports car with fitted blondes, and of the Maharaja of B– skulking off to Kensington High Street wearing dark glasses in the dark, and a coat with the collar turned up even though it was high summer; [...] (Rushdie, 1994, p. 190).

Interestingly, one of the passages involving the narrator’s family and the two Indian guys who lived in their building enhances the misconceptions and prejudice between the East and the West cultures. The narrator’s mother and Certainly-Mary are approached by “[...] two

well-turned-out young men with Beatle haircuts and the buttoned-up, collarless jackets made popular by the band” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 203). They are thought to be relatives of Maharaja of B–, but the narrator’s mother tells the young men she has nothing to do with him and emphasizes that they are a different Indian family. This episode portrays the misinterpretation of the British dealing with foreigners. As the conversation proceeds, the two young British men are not convinced that Aya and the narrator’s mother are not related to Maharaja of B– and one of them threatens the ladies: “[...] Fucking wogs,’ he said. ‘You fucking come over here, you don’t fucking know how to fucking behave. Why don’t you fucking fuck off to fucking Wogistan? Fuck your fucking wog arses [...]” (Rushdie, 1994, p. 204).

The threat endured by the Indian women in Rushdie’s short story exemplifies “[...] how the same geographical space comes to articulate different stories and meanings, such that ‘home’ can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror” (Brah, 1996, p. 207). Likewise, Kristeva (1994) contends that

[...] [t]he other bears the mark of a transgressed boundary, one that inscribes itself irrevocably in either a calm or a disquiet. Whether troubled or joyful, the expression of the foreigner signals that he is “in excess”. The presence of such an internal and visible frontier awakens our most archaic senses [...] (Kristeva, 1994, p. 11)².

Also, the encounter and ongoing coexistence with foreigners may generate either antipathy or empathy when natives face immigrants:

[...] their singularity makes an impression: those eyes, those lips, those features, that skin – different from all the others – set them apart and serve as a reminder that someone also exists there. [...] Yet this discernment of the foreigners’ traits, which captivates us, simultaneously attracts and repels us as well: “At the very least, I am also singular, and therefore I ought to love them”, the observer reflects; “no, I prefer my own singularity, and therefore I must annihilate them”, he may conclude. From love to hatred, the face of the foreigner compels us to disclose the hidden ways in which we confront the world, in which we all disfigure ourselves, even within the most intimate, the most closed communities (Kristeva, 1994, p. 11)³.

The subjectivity of the Indian family and the British young men occupy different positions within the English society. As Kristeva (1994) argues:

[the] animosity provoked by the foreigner – or, at the very least, the irritation (“What are you doing here? This is not your place!”) [...] nonetheless renders somewhat narrow, even blind. For their disdainful hosts lack the distance that the foreigner

² [...] [o] outro traz a marca de um limite transposto que se imprime, de modo irremediável, numa calma ou numa inquietação. Seja ela perturbada ou alegre, a expressão do estrangeiro assinala que ele está “a mais”. A presença de tal fronteira interna e visível desperta os nossos sentidos mais arcaicos [...] (Kristeva, 1994, p. 11).

³ [...] a sua singularidade impressiona: esses olhos, esses lábios, essas faces, essa pele diferente das outras o destacam e lembram que ali existe alguém. [...] Porém esse discernimento dos traços dos estrangeiros, que nos cativa, ao mesmo tempo nos atrai e repele: “Pelo menos, sou também – singular e portanto devo amá-lo”, diz para si o observador; “não, prefiro a minha própria singularidade e portanto devo matá-lo”, pode ele concluir. Do amor ao ódio, o rosto dos estrangeiros nos força a manifestar a maneira secreta que temos de encarar o mundo, de nos desfigurarmos todos, até as comunidades mais familiares, mais fechadas (Kristeva, 1994, p. 11).

possesses, both to see themselves and to see them. The foreigner gains strength from this interval that separates him from others and from himself, granting him a sense of hauteur, not because he holds the truth, but because he relativizes both himself and others, whereas they remain ensnared in the routine of monovalence (Kristeva, 1994, p. 14)⁴.

Accordingly, Rushdie's characters "[...] articulate different positions on the question of 'home'" (Brah, 1996, p. 193). The Indian family in Rushdie's "The Courter" are forced to see that, even though they apparently have the same duties of a British person (paying for the place they live, going to work, etc), they do not fully belong to England.

Thus, the writings of Rushdie and Larihi facilitate the recognition of the foreigner – the Other – by fostering both an awareness of the existence and a respect for the ethnic diversities that shape the contemporary world. As Harris (2011, p. 224) notes, "[...] the diasporic condition stimulates the fictionalization of memories and aspirations for the future [...]"⁵. From this perspective, a new paradigm of the immigrant emerges: the diasporic subject is constituted through the confluence of two or more cultures in the ongoing pursuit of selfhood, as the immigrant frequently resists complete assimilation into any single cultural inheritance.

3 Final Considerations

The Indian characters, either the ones who were born in India ("The Courter") or have an Indian ancestry ("The Interpreter of Maladies"), fictionally come to terms with where they stand "in the context of proliferation of new border crossings (Brah, 1996, p. 179). The negotiations carried out between immigrants and those considered "natives" of the land require a less rigid dialogue, one that takes into account the dialogical specificities of each being. According to Hall (2003),

[t]he alternative is not to cling to closed, unitary, and homogeneous models of 'cultural belonging,' but to embrace the broader processes – the play of similarity and difference – that are transforming culture worldwide. This is the path of the "diaspora", which is the trajectory of a modern people and a modern culture⁶ (Hall, 2003, p. 52).

⁴ [a] animosidade suscitada pelo estrangeiro, ou no mínimo a irritação ("O que você está fazendo aqui? "Aqui não é o seu lugar?") [...] não deixa de julgá-los um pouco limitados, cegos. Pois os seus anfitriões desdenhosos não possuem a distância que ele possui, para se ver e para vê-los. O estrangeiro fortifica-se com esse intervalo que os separa dos outros e de si mesmo, dando-lhe um sentimento altivo, não por estar de posse da verdade, mas por relativizar a si próprio e aos demais, quando estes encontram-se nas garras da rotina da monovalência (Kristeva, 1994, p. 14).

⁵ [...] a condição diaspórica estimula a ficcionalização de memórias e aspirações do futuro [...]" (Harris, 2011, p. 224).

⁶ [a] alternativa não é apegar-se a modelos fechados, unitários e homogêneos de "pertencimento cultural", mas abarcar os processos mais amplos – o jogo da semelhança e da diferença – que estão transformando a cultura no mundo inteiro. Esse é o caminho da "diáspora", que é a trajetória de um povo moderno e de uma cultura moderna. (Hall, 2003, p. 52).

Besides, there was the attempt to illustrate that the hyphenated subjects in Rushdie's "The Courter" and Lahiri's "The Interpreter of Maladies" are apparently "amphibians who do not have an old home and a new home to so much as two half-homes simultaneously" (Iyer, 1993, p. 49).

This work also tried to demonstrate that although Mr. and Mrs. Das in Lahiri's "The Interpreter of Maladies" act more like tourists in India, they also partake of a diasporic movement, once "[...] not all diasporas inscribe home desire through a wish to return to a place of 'origin'" (Brah, 1996, p. 193). They do not wish to take up residency in India, but actually see it as an exotic place to visit sometimes. Raj, Mina and their children apparently are not aware of what they might represent when they are in India. Differently, Rushdie's "The Courter" depicts the story of "international beings" (Iyer, 1993), who are born in India but chose to live in England and the implication of such a choice in the lives of the characters. In the end of "The Courter", Certainly-Mary happens to get sick from her heart because of her homesickness:

So it was England that was breaking her heart, breaking it by not being India. London was killing her by not being Bombay. [...] Or was it that her heart, roped by two different loves, was being pulled both East and West, whinnying and rearing, like those movie horses being yanked this way by Clark Gable and that way Montgomery Clift, and she knew that to live she would have to choose? (Rushdie, 1994, p. 209).

Similarly, one is able to figure that the dilemma of hyphenated subjects is supposedly to decide between their multiple homes as "[...] this tradition of multiple homes is invariably concerned with identity [...]" (Iyer, 1993, p. 49).

In the final analysis, the narrator in "The Courter" decides to keep himself in the state of in-betweenness: "[...] I buck, I snort, I whinny, I rear, I kick. Ropes, I do not choose between you. Lassoes, lariats, I choose neither of you, and both. Do you hear? I refuse to choose" (Rushdie, 1994, p. 211). In conclusion, the diaspora space which permeates Rushdie's "The Courter" and Lahiri's "The Interpreter of Maladies" are:

points of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (Brah, 1996, p. 208).

Thus, through their writing, Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri portray the immigrant condition by engaging with and challenging entrenched stereotypes. These stereotypes, for various reasons, have long permeated the spaces of dialogue between the diasporic subject – shaped by the particularities of their alterity – and the hegemonic subject, whose understanding of identity, both self and other, is often rigid and intolerant. For all these reasons, even if Rushdie and Lahiri's stories differ in their routes, in the end, their main characters search to figure where they stand in their hyphenated condition, mainly through their perception of what they might be inside and / or outside India.

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