

In Other Words Study Guide

In Other Words by Jhumpa Lahiri

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Summary

In her book “In Other Words” Jhumpa Lahiri shares her struggles and breakthroughs as she learns to both speak and write Italian fluently. The book is Jhumpa’s first major work in Italian. It is presented in both the Italian and English translations. In her story Jhumpa discusses her relationship with the Italian language as well as the languages of English and Bengali. Another major theme in the book is identity, as Jhumpa bases a good deal of her identity on language.

Jhumpa details her developing relationship with the Italian language from her first encounter with it through the completion of her book. She fell in love with the Italian language when she and her sister visited Italy in 1994. Jhumpa began learning to speak Italian using tutors who lived in America. She felt, however, that she was in exile from the language she loves. Many years later Jhumpa decided she must live in Rome in order to immerse herself in the language. Part of her decision to immerse herself in Italian included her decision to read only in Italian.

She describes the way she reads a book in Italian and then went back to identify unfamiliar words using a dictionary. She gathered words she wanted to learn and remember as she went about her day-to-day business. Jhumpa surprised herself by one day beginning to write her diary in Italian. She realizes that change had come about because she was finally hearing Italian in her head. One day, while sitting in a library, Jhumpa conceived her first short story in Italian.

From this point Jhumpa begins discussing with her reader her insecurities with language in more depth. Her writing in Italian was constrained by her limited vocabulary. She struggled so much with her writing in Italian that she believed her goal may be an impossible one. Still, she kept going because she wanted to test her creative powers in Italian, a language that she loves. She also believed this lack of comfort with Italian would spark and rejuvenate her creative process. She describes her feeling of overwhelming joy when her her work was first published in Italian. The book includes two short stories written by Jhumpa in Italian.



The Crossing and The Dictionary

Summary

The section “The Crossing” Jhumpa describes a lake she wishes to swim across. She has seen others swim across so she knows it can be done. She spends a month swimming the circumference of the lake. Finally, with two friends, she swims across the lake. Jhumpa compares the way she once studied the Italian language to the way she approaches her swim across the lake. Just a few weeks after her successful swim across the lake, Jhumpa leaves America to live in Italy.

In the section “The Dictionary” Jhumpa buys an Italian dictionary with the definitions in English when she goes with her sister to Italy in 1994. She depends on the book to help her discover the meanings of the words she hears and reads. Twenty years later, Jhumpa decides to live in Rome. She doesn’t use the first dictionary she bought as much. She relies instead on a more substantial dictionary written only in Italian.

Analysis

In this book Jhumpa tells the story of her developing relationship with the Italian language. It details the work she did in preparing herself for writing this book “In Other Words” which is the first book she had ever written in Italian. This particular edition of the book includes both the original Italian along with the English translation. Jhumpa did not translate her book from the Italian to the English. She chose instead to have another author translate it for her.

One theme that the reader may notice right away is Jhumpa’s reference to language and things associated with language in terms of relationships. She describes the first English to Italian dictionary that she used as an authoritative parent. When she begins to feel more secure in the language, she leaves the dictionary at home. Just as a child might begin to go out on short excursions without its parents. She describes this act of going out without the dictionary as feeling as if she has begun to grow up. After she “grows up” she compares her relationship to this same dictionary to that of a brother.

Notice also Jhumpa’s use of the example of the lake she wants to swim across to help her readers understand her desire, and her struggle with, speaking and writing in Italian. Although a person may not understand the difficulties in learning a new language, they can understand a swimmer who can stand up in the water is safer than one who is in water so deep she can’t touch the bottom. The safety of the shore represents the safety of English, the language with which Jhumpa is most familiar. Her swims in the shallow water represent her attempts to learn Italian but stay within a safe range of her familiar language. In the center of the lake, however, Jhumpa is far away from the safety of familiarity she must keep going in order to make it safely to the other side, a side where



she is comfortable in Italian. Jhumpa uses analogies, such as this one, to help her reader understand her unique struggle with the Italian language.

Vocabulary

millennia, circumference, diameter, dominant, departure, impermeable, authoritative, lexical, monolingual



Love at First Sight and Exile

Summary

In “Love at First Sight” Jhumpa first goes to Italy in 1994 with her sister. She is studying Renaissance architecture. She realizes she likes the sound of the Italian language. She feels it was familiar even though it is foreign to her and she can't respond to anyone who speaks to her in that language. Although she knows her desire is not practical, it is at this point in her life that Jhumpa first asks permission of the language to begin learning it.

In “Exile” Jhumpa thinks of Dante, Ovid and her mother, three people who were exiled from their languages and inspirations when she considers her own exile from Italian, the language she wants to learn. The feeling of being in exile because of language is familiar to Jhumpa. Her native language is Bengali, a foreign language in America. Even though Jhumpa can speak Bengali she cannot write or read it.

She begins her study of Italian by buying a book the title of which claims that she can teach herself Italian. She finds she doesn't like the silence and detachment of this self-teaching process. She decides to write her doctoral thesis on the influence of Italian architecture on seventeenth century English plays. This gives her a reason to take courses in Italian. After two years of studying she still can't read in Italian. When she travels to Venice in 2000 she feels prepared but discovers she is still barely able to ask simple questions and make basic requests. The Italian language remains like a locked gate to her until she meets Marco and Claudia at the Mantua literary festival. When they find out that Jhumpa wants to learn Italian better they begin speaking to her in nothing but Italian.

Analysis

Notice the way that Jhumpa describes her relationship with Italian as being like falling in love. This is another of the analogies that she uses to help her reader understand her feelings. Although not everyone could understand the strange desire Jhumpa feels to learn Italian, most everyone is familiar with the connection between two people that sometimes sparks love. Again, she puts her experience in words that most everyone can understand. Notice also this analogy develops the theme of relationships with Jhumpa comparing her first feelings for the language with those of a person falling in love with another person.

The theme of relationships is also developed when Jhumpa discusses the way that Marco and Claudia help her to become more familiar with Italian by speaking to her in Italian. She compares the way they helped her learn the language to the way parents would help a child learn to speak. Notice that Jhumpa indicates that she did not learn English in that way. The reader wonders how Jhumpa came to learn to speak and read



English but Jhumpa does not include that information in the section. It is, however, known that Jhumpa spoke Bengali as a child so it can be assumed that even though she believes her relationship with that language is flawed and faulty, she did learn that language from her parents.

In this section of the book Jhumpa touches on the theme of identity and its connection with language. She indicates she's always felt like an exile when it comes to language because of the fact she grew up speaking Bengali, a language that is foreign in America. Speaking Bengali made her feel different from other Americans. Yet she notes she wasn't completely comfortable speaking Bengali either and spoke that language with an American accent. It seems that Jhumpa can be said to feel like she is without a language.

Vocabulary

auditory, paradoxical, inexplicable, migrate, linguistic, estrangement, schism, disjunction, paradoxically, exhortatory



The Conversations and The Renunciation

Summary

In the section “The Conversations” Jhumpa is embarrassed because she is to interview a Roman writer but feels her Italian is insufficient to do the interview in that language. In 2004 Jhumpa’s husband brings her the phone number of a woman who teaches Italian. At the end of each of their hour sessions, Jhumpa’s tutor gives her a list of words she should know for their conversations. Jhumpa has trouble remembering them. At her next literary festival, however, she is able to exchange a few sentences in Italian. She returns to the metaphor of the lake. She can walk in deeper, but still has to keep her feet on the bottom.

In 2008 Jhumpa is invited to Italy again. She works with a different teacher in preparation. Even though the teacher tells Jhumpa she will be fine in Italy with the language she knows Jhumpa feels her conversational skills are still inadequate. Jhumpa begins working with her third tutor in 2009. They start at the beginning. Jhumpa works with that teacher for four years. At the end of their time together Jhumpa decides she wants to move to Italy.

In “The Renunciation,” Jhumpa decides to move to Rome. For six months before the move she refuses to read in English. She feels she must immerse herself in Italian and leave English behind. The process of reading in Italian is difficult and Jhumpa has to stop often to identify words she doesn’t know. She also describes the experience as fulfilling and believes that while reading in Italian she rediscovers the joy of reading.

Analysis

In this section of the story, Jhumpa shares her continuing struggles with learning the Italian language. Her first challenge is finding someone in America with whom she feels comfortable practicing conversations in the language. She works with three different tutors between the years of 2004 and 2013. Notice that Jhumpa indicates she feels most comfortable with the tutor who requires Jhumpa to come to her for lessons. Because Jhumpa is able to get away from her daily environment she is able to more completely dedicate herself to her language.

Jhumpa indicates she has reached a transition point in her journey. She is transitioning to the point where she needs to live in the country where Italian is spoken in order to learn it as well as she wants to. This point of transition is a step in her journey. She reminds the reader of her analogy of the lake. Although she’s able to wade deeper into the water and still feel secure, she still feels rooted in English because she has to keep her feet on the bottom of the lake to feel secure.

Vocabulary

impeccable, elusive, evanescent, palpable, sporadically, arid, renunciation, recede

Reading with a Dictionary and Gathering Words

Summary

In the section “Reading with a Dictionary” Jhumpa creates a personal dictionary for herself in a notebook. The words listed are those she doesn’t recognize when reading an Italian text. She has even begun listing the definitions in Italian. She describes odd reactions she’s had when she has encountered words in Italian with which she wasn’t familiar. One of these took place on a train. She felt restless until she could pin down the definition of the word that struck her attention. She notes that even though she feels she should be working toward a goal of reading Italian as well as she reads English she admits she enjoys the fact she feels more involved in her reading when she reads in Italian. As Jhumpa reads and goes about her daily tasks she gathers words she wants to learn. Jhumpa compares her gathering of words in her dictionary to the work a gardener does in pulling weeds because both jobs don’t have a foreseeable end. Jhumpa enjoys her task of gathering words and is overjoyed when she finds a new way to express an idea.

In the section “Gathering Words” Jhumpa describes herself as gathering words unfamiliar to her into a basket. She notes that even though she fills the basket full each time she goes out, she returns with only a few of these words remaining. In this example the basket represents Jhumpa’s memory. Even though she gathers words of note all day, she remembers only a few. She feels as if she has abandoned the rest. Even as she continues to work day after day Jhumpa knows she doesn’t just want to gather the words up, she wants to be able to use them and have them available for conversation when she needs them. She compares her growing stash of Italian words to the growth of a child.

Analysis

In the theme of relationships, Jhumpa again speaks of her attempts to have a relationship with the Italian language. When there are words that she is unable to remember she wonders if it is because those words don’t want to have a relationship with her. When she considers her growing vocabulary of Italian words, she compares its growth to the growth of a child. In the same way a child’s growth is monitored weekly, Jhumpa monitors and records the growth of her infant language.

As she has in the past, Jhumpa uses allegory to help her reader understand what she is feeling as she tries to conquer the Italian language. She tells a story of how she goes out and gathers words in a basket as if she were gathering nuts or fruit. In this story the basket represents her memory.

Vocabulary

negligible, provoke, enthralled, perpetual, ecstasy, insatiable, methodical, lexicon



The Diary and The Story

Summary

In the section “The Diary” Jhumpa and her family arrive in Rome just before the traditional August holiday. Most of the people in the town have left for vacations. The second day they are there Jhumpa is unable to unlock the door to their apartment after a day of shopping. They have to wait for a locksmith. Her children cry to go back to America. Although life in Rome seems impossible at first Jhumpa notices a change in her writing. When she sits down to write in her diary one day she begins writing in Italian. She realizes at this point she no longer hears English in her brain. That language is being replaced by Italian. Even though she knows the Italian in which she is writing is not grammatically correct and she sometimes can’t find the right words, she continues to write.

Jhumpa describes how she transitioned from writing in her diary to writing short stories in Italian in the section of her book entitled “The Story.” She struggles to perfect her short sketches and is horrified when she is made aware of all the mistakes she has made when her teacher checks her work. She believes learning how to write in Italian is even harder than the task of learning how to speak in Italian. One day, while working in a library Jhumpa is surprised when an entire story comes to her mind. She writes the first half of the story that day and returns the next day to finish the story. Her method of writing in Italian is different from her method for writing in English. She doesn’t correct and polish as she works, she just keeps writing. Typing the story in Italian into a computer is another challenge for Jhumpa as her fingers are even sluggish with the new language.

She describes her story saying it is about a woman who moves to a different city searching for change. One of the few things she takes with her is a black sweater. At first she isn’t sure if the story works or not. It is only months later that she realized the story was about language with the sweater acting as a symbol of language.

Analysis

Jhumpa continues to describe the steps she takes in deepening her “relationship” with the Italian language. She surprises herself when she starts writing in Italian in her diary. Even though she is a prolific writer in English, when she writes her first story in Italian she is surprised because she uses a technique that is totally different from her writing technique in English. She tells her reader that even typing in Italian the first time seemed awkward and foreign.

Arrival, or maybe more correctly the journey toward arrival, is a theme in the novel. In this section Jhumpa takes a big step toward her arrival by the sudden act of writing her diary in Italian. This is one of the many steps that take her from the point where she



started with no experience with the Italian language to one in which she was fluent in that language. Jhumpa describes her diary as reflecting “a radical transition, a state of complete bewilderment” (p. 57).

Also significant in this section is that Jhumpa discusses the differences between attempting to speak a foreign language and attempting to write in it. “The spoken language is a kind of antechamber with respect to the written, which has a stricter, more elusive logic” (p. 63). She describes the process of writing in Italian as being more difficult and less forgiving. Especially difficult for her is the her teacher’s corrections on the first piece of writing she gave to him to correct. She is ashamed because almost every sentence had changes that needed to be made to grammar and vocabulary.

In the theme of relationships notice that Jhumpa, like many writers, feels the relationship of a parent and a child with her work. “I am aware of a break, along with a birth” (p. 63) Jhumpa writes about her first story written in Italian. Particularly interesting is the fact she notes she’s never felt that way about anything she’s ever written in English.

Vocabulary

clandestine, deprivation, trifles, arduous, sadistic, protagonist



The Exchange

Summary

A female translator wanted to become a different person. She had a good life but thought she was flawed in some way. She gave away almost all of her possessions and went to live in a city where she didn't know anyone and didn't know the language. She took with her only a minimum of clothing. One article was a black sweater.

One day as she stood under the cornice of a building waiting for a rain shower to stop, she noticed women going into a building across the street. She decided to follow them. She walked up the stairs with the other women. They were greeted by a thin woman who invited them inside. The room contained food, couches, a three-way mirror and black clothes hanging on a rack. The woman who owned the apartment had designed the clothes.

The translator didn't like the clothes even though they looked good on her. She was also distracted by a tired looking woman working in the background of the festive atmosphere. The translator decided to leave but couldn't find her sweater. The other women had left the room while she was looking for it. The woman who owned the apartment asked the woman who was working to hang up all the clothes and help look for the sweater. That woman found a sweater but the translator said it wasn't hers. The owner checked with all of the women who had attended that day but none of them had even been wearing a sweater.

She returned home with the unfamiliar sweater. When she woke the next morning she recognized the sweater as her own. Even though it was her sweater, it was different from the original. She liked it better. When she put it on she felt she was someone else.

Analysis

This section of the book bears the same name as the first short story that Jhumpa wrote in Italian. In fact, the chapter appears to be an English translation of that story for those reading the English version of Jhumpa's book. For those able to read the Italian, it would be the story as she wrote it in that language. In the prior section of her book entitled "The Story" Jhumpa has already told the reader that the sweater represents language. The woman in the story, the protagonist, seems to be modeled after Jhumpa. She is a woman seeking relief from her feelings of imperfection by immersing herself into a different culture and language just as Jhumpa has done.

Notice the connection between identity and language is a strong theme in Jhumpa's short story as well as her book as a whole. She has indicated in past sections of the book that she feels her identity is incomplete because of her language background. Jhumpa seems to be trying to find an identity for herself by conquering the Italian



language. In the short story, the woman was able to find a new identity for herself, one that felt comfortable, through a different language.

Note also the change in tense and point of view. While the previous sections of the book have been written in the first person point of view in the present tense, this short story is written in the past tense. The story is also told from the viewpoint of a third person omniscient narrator from the point of view of the translator.

Vocabulary

revulsion, cornice, illegible, diaphanous, inanimate, methodically, versatile, antipathy, disconcerted, transfiguration, insidious



The Fragile Shelter

Summary

In the section “The Fragile Shelter” Jhumpa tells her reader that it was when she began writing in English as a child that she felt she finally had an identity. She wonders why she wants to give up writing in English, a language in which she feels authoritative, in order to write in Italian, a language in which she struggles to express herself. She comes to the conclusion that she can be more creative if she breaks out of her comfort zone.

She tries to explain to her reader that she writes because it is her way of understanding the world. For this reason, she believes her desire to write in Italian is her way of wanting to know the language in the fullest way possible. Because she grew up feeling as if she didn’t have a culture or a country she could call her own, Jhumpa dedicated herself to words. She describes the way that words and people’s lives are similar. She argues both a word and a person can have a boundless variety of different meanings and uses.

Analysis

The theme of identity is addressed in this section of the novel. Jhumpa indicates that before she began writing she didn’t feel she had a real sense of identity. Writing, however, gives her the feeling of knowing who she is. Because she didn’t have a culture or a country by which she could define herself, Jhumpa learned to define herself through words.

Again, relationships are discussed in relation to words. In this section Jhumpa indicates that both words and the lives of people are similar because they can both be used in a variety of different ways. This strengthens the theme that to Jhumpa words and language are living beings with whom she has relationships with through reading and writing.

Vocabulary

novice, crucible, nuances, boundless, ineffable



Impossibility and Venice

Summary

In the section “Impossibility” Jhumpa writes about her realization that there are certain writers whose abilities she will never be able to reach or surpass. Since she’s begun writing in Italian a quote by Carlos Fuentes in which he advises other writers that there are “certain heights one will never be able to reach” (p. 89). She feels that in Italian she is not striving to achieve the greatness of master writers but is instead challenged by her desire to reach the heart of the Italian language. She goes on to discuss the ways in which technology has made other parts of our lives easier but cannot do anything to make it easier to learn to write in a foreign language.

She expands the example of the lake she wanted to cross into an ocean to demonstrate what a large task she has realized it is to learn a new language. She believes she still understands and writes in only the surface of Italian and is not able to delve into what she believes is the real substance of the language. Through all her struggle with Italian, however, Jhumpa realizes that if the language were not such a challenge she would have no motivation to try to create, to write, in it.

In the section “Venice” Jhumpa compares her relationship with Italian to the connection between the bridges and canals in that city. She describes this relationship as a dialogue. The bridges represent her skills in Italian. She builds these bridges to keep her away from the water, which represents English. Each sentence she writes in Italian is a bridge that takes her to another place.

Analysis

Jhumpa discusses her insecurities about writing in Italian in this section of the novel. Although she knows she won’t ever be able to write as well as some of the masters, she uses her insecurities to keep herself going. Notice that she expands on the analogy of the lake in this section. She realizes that the idea of a lake does not fully represent the immenseness of the journey she has undertaken to learn and write in Italian. She changes the image of the lake to that of an ocean that she wishes to cross. This gives the reader a clearer image of the challenge that Jhumpa is up against.

Jhumpa also talks about relationships in this section of the novel. The relationships she discusses here are not those between people but instead between bridges and canals, water and land. The image of standing in the middle of a bridge over a canal represents where Jhumpa believes she is in her journey to learn Italian. She is not at the end of her journey nor is she any longer at the beginning. She is suspended somewhere between where she was and where she wants to be. She also touches on the idea of arrivals as she indicates that she doesn’t know if she will ever arrive at her goal of writing in Italian



or not. She isn't sure there is a bridge that exists that will carry her from where she is to where she wants to be.

Vocabulary

mediocrity, pertinent, refutes, ferocity, insuperable, peripheral, unattainable, topography, enticing, ascend, inverted, transcends, nebulous, chimera, atypical



The Imperfect

Summary

In the section “The Imperfect” Jhumpa speaks first about the uses of Italian prepositions and articles, parts of Italian grammar that continue to confuse her. When she began speaking Italian in Rome every day she also became aware of the fact she was never sure when to use the imperfect and the simple past tense of verbs. It is in instances when she is forced to face her uncertainties in speaking the Italian language that Jhumpa feels imperfect. She identifies with this feeling of imperfection because she has always felt as if she were somehow flawed.

Jhumpa explores the idea that there might be a linguistic reason that she feels so incomplete. As a child she had tried to speak Bengali perfectly to please her parents. Because she lived in America and wanted to be considered American she also wanted to speak that language well. For this reason Jhumpa felt she had no roots and was suspended between the two languages. She realizes she is not rooted in the Italian language either. She credits her feeling of imperfection with her desire to push herself to create. Since she was a child Jhumpa said she covered her feelings of anxiety and incompleteness in her writing.

Analysis

Jhumpa continues to discuss the roots of her anxiety in this section of the novel and says that even her anxiety about not being perfect has encouraged her to keep writing. She touches again on the idea that she grew up feeling as if she had no solid identity because she spoke both Bengali and English. She believes some of her anxiety came from the dual languages because she both wanted to please her parents by being able to speak Bengali perfectly and be known as an American by speaking English perfectly.

Notice also in this section of her book that Jhumpa touches on the theme of relationships when she compares her books to children. She indicates it is through the writing process that she feels a book is birthed, and then nurtured while it grows. After she’s finished the process of writing, she indicates the book is no longer a living thing to her but is instead dead. Notice this arrival at the end of a book is similar to the arrival at the end of a life, both these arrivals are similar to a death according to Jhumpa.

Vocabulary

stupendous, temporal, myopia, motif, homage, gestation



The Hairy Adolescent and The Second Exile

Summary

In the section “The Hairy Adolescent,” Jhumpa is invited to participate in a literary festival where she is asked to write a piece based on the subject of the festival. In this case the subject is “Winners and Losers.” The pieces will be included in a bilingual catalog. Jhumpa chooses to write her submission in Italian. Although she does not want to be the one to translate her piece into English, Jhumpa’s husband encourages her to do so. She is surprised how difficult the translation process is. Since she is a more fluent writer in English than in Italian, she believes the Italian piece feels lifeless after it has been translated into English. In English she could find multiple ways to express herself instead of being handicapped by her still-limited Italian. She compares her English skills to a hairy adolescent angry at being neglected while she tended to her Italian, still in its infant stages. As she translates, she feels divided between the two. She finds a positive in the experience saying that the act of translating did make the Italian version of her piece more clear. Regardless, she admits the translation seemed like a regression. She describes it as being a destructive process rather than a creative one. When Jhumpa presents aloud her piece in Italian, however, she says it is the first time she feels confident in her Italian.

In “The Second Exile” Jhumpa misses the Italian language when she visits America for a month. She compares her feelings to those of a mother leaving a child alone for the first time. She is anxious and feels guilty. Additionally, Jhumpa fears that the Italian she has learned will disappear during her brief stay in America. She understands now how her parents must have missed their language when they moved to America. Although she relates to her parents, Jhumpa believes her strange reaction to being away from those who speak Italian is unusual because Italian is not her native language but rather one she has learned as an adult.

It is when she goes to a used book sale that Jhumpa realizes how estranged she has become from English. She finds no comfort in it in the absence of Italian yet it is the language that she knows best. It makes her feel even more as if she is a writer who has no definitive language. She continues to read in Italian. Her old Italian tutor gave her some books in that language which have brought her comfort. Even though she is reading, Jhumpa says that she is not able to write in Italian while in America.

When Jhumpa begins to hear Italian being spoken again at the airport on her way back to Rome she is at first comforted. Then she realizes she is different from the people at the airport because she isn’t going home where her native language is spoken. She feels most sharply that she doesn’t have a mother tongue or a homeland to which she can return.



Analysis

In this section of her book Jhumpa describes her first attempt to translate one of her own works from Italian to English. This discussion adds to the theme of translation. Jhumpa has already said, and repeats it in this section of her story, that she believes that to translate a work from another language is the most intimate way of reading. She believes she becomes most involved in her reading when she reads this way. However, Jhumpa finds that translating her own work is frustrating and deconstructive.

She chooses to compare these two languages to children whose needs and abilities conflict as she tries to translate. English is the older brother whom Jhumpa describes as a hairy adolescent who is frustrated because Jhumpa has been neglecting him. She says her Italian is like an infant that needs constant care and coddling. It is through her use of this analogy that Jhumpa's readers can understand how she is feeling. Most people can relate to sibling rivalry even if they haven't tried to translate their own work into another language. Jhumpa continues the analogy of being the mother of these languages when she describes the fear and anxiety she felt when she left Rome to visit in America for a short while. She says she felt the same emotions that she felt when she first had to leave her children with someone else watching them. Again, while few people would understand Jhumpa's separation anxiety from the Italian language, they can relate to the anxiety that being separated from their child brings.

Jhumpa also continues to discuss how her study of Italian causes her to feel less and less like she has an identity. At the end of the section "A Second Exile" Jhumpa comes to the conclusion that she has not been exiled from the Italian language because she felt she was "exiled even from the definition of exile" (p. 133). Even as she has become more familiar with the Italian language and has fallen more and more deeply in love with it, Jhumpa realizes that it does not take the place of having a mother tongue. She feels displaced and different from all the Italians returning to Italy because they are returning to their language while Jhumpa has simply attempted to adopt this language. It is almost as if she feels more lost the more she tries to make an identity for herself.

Vocabulary

insipid, transcendent, visceral, existential, centripetal, tranquil, annihilated, vortex, cadences, proximity, abyss, estrangement, pervasive



The Wall

Summary

Jhumpa describes an incident in which a store clerk assumes Jhumpa is not a native of Italy because of her physical appearance but compliments Jhumpa's husband, who speaks Italian with a Spanish accent but looks like he could be from Italy, on his perfect Italian. Jhumpa believes that she will always be seen as a foreigner in Italy because of the way that she looks. There are two different ways people talk to her because she is recognized as a foreigner. Her friends, who know she speaks Italian, speak to her freely in that language. When she goes into a store where people don't know her and she tries to speak Italian the clerks don't understand her. She believes these people don't understand her because they don't want to accept her. Although she has worked hard to learn Italian, she feels that some Italians are offended by her use of their language.

She tells her reader she had the same issue with English. Even though she is American, people asked why she didn't write in her native language. She feels sometimes she has to explain why she has an Indian name but speaks and writes in English. Even in India Jhumpa says she has encountered this mind set which she refers to as the wall. The people there expect her to speak only English and are surprised when she talks to them in Bengali. She ends her section by telling her reader that her writing is an effort to break down the wall.

Analysis

A good deal of this section deals with identity as Jhumpa talks about the preconceived notions people have about her because she has an Indian name with the dark hair and some Indian features. The hurt Jhumpa feels because those around her try to categorize her based on her looks comes clearly through in her writing. Notice the hurt in her tone magnifies when she shares how some Italians even seem offended that she knows and can speak their language. She indicates she's run into this same "wall" with all three languages she speaks. In America some people ask her why she doesn't write in her native language. In Italy people assume she can't speak Italian. Those who accept she speaks the language assume she learned it from her husband. In India, people assume that because she grew up in America that she can't speak Bengali.

Vocabulary

violent, fluent, monosyllables, desperately, immersed



The Triangle

Summary

In the section “The Triangle” Jhumpa summarizes the three languages she knows, and describes the relationships between herself and each of them. She spoke only Bengali until she was four. She remembers feeling traumatized when she went to nursery school and had to learn to speak in the unfamiliar language of English. While she describes Bengali as her mother, she says that English was her stepmother who took over raising her linguistically once she learned to read. She felt like she was split into two people with one being the girl who spoke Bengali at home as her parents wished and the other one the girl who spoke English at school. When she was 25, Jhumpa began studying Italian. It was with the addition of this language that a triangle was formed. She believes that her act of learning Italian somehow helped her to escape from the conflict between Bengali and English.

Jhumpa next discusses the way these languages interact with one another in her world. Italian and English have many similar words because both languages came from Latin roots. Because she knows Bengali, Jhumpa is able to speak Italian without the typical accent of those who speak primarily English. English, she says, is her primary language while Bengali represents her past and Italian her future. She feels both those languages are still in their childhood phases. She fears there may come a time when they will die out entirely.

Analysis

The theme of relationships takes on a new aspect as Jhumpa describes the relationships she has had with the three languages she knows and the inner-relationships between those languages. She was traumatized by the English language but she still grew to love it. She feared and still fears losing her ability to speak Bengali because this language represents her parents. She seems to have chosen to learn Italian because it is a language not tied up in bad memories and experiences. It is as if she hopes she can start out with a clean slate with Italian and use it without having to face all the baggage associated with English.

Again a good deal of Jhumpa’s identity is tied up in language. She sees herself as a fractured person because she felt pulled between two languages as a child. She even had separate identities that correlated with each language. Her parents didn’t allow her to speak English at home so there was no crossover in language as far as her home life went. At school Jhumpa said her teachers and friends weren’t even aware that she spoke a different language at home another dividing factor for the “home” Jhumpa and the “school” Jhumpa.

Vocabulary

encounter, traumatized, deciphering, diphthongs, indelible



The Metamorphosis

Summary

Domenico Starnone, one of Jhumpa's writer friends sent her a message explaining that learning a new language is almost like developing a new life. His message helps Jhumpa to better understand her desire to experience a metamorphosis through language. She refers to the instance in the book "Metamorphoses" by Ovid when Daphne is turned into a tree. Jhumpa relates to this feeling of metamorphosis because she it is during this process that one creature exists as two. Daphne was still a nymph but was also a tree. Jhumpa believes that she is fleeing from something through her study of Italian. On one hand she feels confined when she writes or speaks in Italian because she doesn't have the freedom of vocabulary she enjoys in English. On the other hand, she believes she is trying to flee from the struggle that the English language represents to her. Despite the fact the English language causes her a great deal of her anxiety, it also had brought Jhumpa fame because she is a prize winning English writer. Writing in Italian, however, gives Jhumpa a chance to explore her writing abilities without her work being compared to anything she has done in the past. She notes that some believe she is being disloyal to the English language by wanting to write in a different language. She realizes she is rebelling by changing herself the same way her mother rebelled against America by refusing to change. Even though Jhumpa knows she can't have a complete metamorphosis, that she can never be an Italian writer, she does hope to move away from the confines of her writing in English to develop a different voice.

Analysis

Jhumpa continues to discuss the themes of language, identity and arrivals in this section of the book. Although she has hinted at it in past sections it is in this section that she credits the English language with all of the anxiety she has in her life. It is this language that threatened to separate her from her parents when she was a child. Even though it threatened this separation it is also a language that Jhumpa loves and earned fame for herself in.

In this section she brings into her story the idea of metamorphosis. Like some of the other analogies Jhumpa uses in her story this one has a beginning, a middle and an arrival. "Metamorphosis is a process that is both violent and regenerative, a death and a birth. It's not clear where the nymph ends and the tree begins" (p. 163). There is a point in every metamorphosis where the person, animal or object that is changing has characteristics of both what it was and what it will be. Jhumpa knows she will never be able to change completely into an Italian writer but hopes that she will get to the point where she will be able to have a unique voice in Italian.



While the reader might have suspected that Jhumpa's story "The Exchange" was autobiographical it is in this section of the book that she acknowledges that she, like the translator in the story, wants to be a different person. She believes that by writing in Italian she can leave behind the fractured person she believes the English language has made her into and be the person she wants to be.

Vocabulary

metamorphosis, definitive, sublime, regenerative, contiguity, juxtaposition, primordial, ambiguous, precipitously, renunciation, epoch, permeable



Plumbing the Depths

Summary

In the section “Plumbing the Depths” Jhumpa refers to the way that Cesare Pavese encouraged Rosa Calzecchi Onesti to translate the works of Homer into modern Italian. She admires Pavese for his powerful knowledge of the English language. Although she has some of this ability in English, she lacks a thorough knowledge of Italian vocabulary. She doesn’t have the common knowledge of Italian to understand which words sound right, how Italians commonly express themselves and what words are outdated. She struggles to hone a style for herself in Italian. She admits to having times while writing “In Other Words” that she was so disheartened by the struggle that she wanted to stop.

Analysis

This chapter is dedicated to Jhumpa’s feelings of being a subpar writer in Italian. Because she didn’t grow up in Italy the flow of the language doesn’t come naturally to her. She compares and contrasts her experience and knowledge of both the English and Italian languages. As she shares her struggle with her reader her tone is hopeful but at the same time realistic. She uses the analogies of unusual outfits to describe how she feels as an Italian writer. In one example her mismatched clothes represent how mismatched she believes her word choices are. In the other example she imagines herself as dressing up in her mother’s clothes, pretending to be someone more mature and experienced than she actually feels.

Vocabulary

archaic, meticulously, incisive, colloquial, spurious, amalgam, epochs, hone, transient, methodical



The Scaffolding and Half-Light

Summary

In the section “The Scaffolding” describes the Portico di Ottavia as it stands in Rome. Even though she was wary of other buildings that were supported by scaffolding she never felt wary of this ancient ruin although it was surrounded by scaffolding. Jhumpa tells her reader that even as a child she wrote to feel alone. With Italian she depended on help from Emily Dickinson, her muse, for inspiration to write. She wrote her book, about a chapter a week, then turned it over to her Italian teacher for correction. After that was finished she let two writers critique the work. The editors at the magazine where her work was first published also helped by accepting her unusual writing style and technique. She compares those who helped her correct and critique her writing to the scaffolding that supported many of the buildings in Rome. She acknowledges these people who have helped to hold up her writing and keep it from crumbling.

The section “Half-Light” tells of a man who wakes from a dream. In that dream his wife was driving a car that had no body but she didn’t seem to notice. When he wakes it is still dark but he decides to go ahead and start his day. He has been working abroad for months and is out of sync with the time. He notices an old piece of toast in the toaster. He knows his wife doesn’t eat that type of bread because she has an intolerance for it. He wonders if his wife has a lover and imagines them being in the kitchen together. He decides it is his piece of toast, that he forgot it before he left. After he finishes his breakfast he lays back down beside his wife. He realizes the dream represented his wonder at having stayed with one woman so long. He realizes how unrealistic his thoughts about his trip with his wife were and how much he prefers the reality of their life at the present.

Analysis

Notice first the switch in tense in “Scaffolding.” While the rest of the book was written in the present tense, Jhumpa writes this section from the past tense. The purpose of the change in tense is to signify to the reader that she’s now writing from the position of looking back at her work after it was finished. She describes her process of writing and tells how it was different from her writing process in English. In keeping with the title, she acknowledges the many people who worked like scaffolding for her work to make sure it held up and worked as a whole. This is a final aspect of language and writing with which Jhumpa was unfamiliar because when she wrote in English, it was a solitary process, she didn’t have to depend on help from anyone. In it also in this section that Jhumpa shares the overwhelming joy she feels when the parts of her book were finally first published in an Italian magazine.

The final section of the book is another short story. It is perhaps an analogy that compares the relationship between a husband and a wife to that of Jhumpa’s



relationship with Italian. Remember she noted at the beginning of the story that she described the beginning of the relationship with the feeling of falling in love. During his honeymoon the man remembers the energy and excitement that he pursued the relationship with his new wife. Now that they've been married for some time he sees the possibility of disaster yet he likes where they are in life better than where they were when they started. Jhumpa seems to be saying that she is happy with where she is in her relationship with the Italian language. Even though she knows there are still obstacles to overcome, she's glad she has seen the relationship through the rough patches.

Vocabulary

conceived, methodically, copious, punctilious, thematic, collaboration, pediment, annulment, nocturnal, lucid



Important People

Dante

Dante is one of Jhumpa's inspirations during the journey in which she learns to speak, read and write Italian. During the week Jhumpa spent with her sister in Italy, they stayed near Dante's house. She was inspired by Dante because he had to wait nine years before he could speak to Beatrice who was his inspiration for writing, a sort of exile. Jhumpa felt she, too, was exiled from Italian, the language she loved.

Ovid

Ovid was a poet exiled from Rome. He is one of Jhumpa's sources of inspiration as she tries to learn Italian. During one interview she credited Ovid's "Metamorphoses" as being her favorite book.

Jhumpa's Parents

Jhumpa's Parents added to her language insecurity because they insisted that she speak her mother tongue of Bengali while she was with them. They were from Calcutta, India. Jhumpa's mother continued to dress and behave as she had when she lived in India even after she moved to the United States. She prided herself on her dedication to her Indian culture. Jhumpa's mother was an inspiration to her when she began learning Italian because her mother had written poems in Bengali even after moving to the United States. Jhumpa recalls how her mother was never able to find books written in her native language.

Janus

Janus is a Roman god with two faces. The faces can see both the past and the future. Jhumpa relates to Janus as she tries to complete a book she is writing in English at the same time she is immersing herself in reading Italian in preparation to live in Rome.

Alberto

Alberto is Jhumpa's husband. Because his name sounded Italian and he looked Italian, people assumed that Alberto was Italian. They sometimes asked Jhumpa if she learned Italian from him and commented that Alberto's Italian was excellent. These comments frustrated Jhumpa because she had studied the language and felt she knew it much better than he.



Domenico Starnone

Domenico Starnone is a writer friend of Jhumpa's from Rome. He helped her to understand that writing in a new language was like getting a new life. His advice to her helped her to feel better about her own disorientation when she started trying to write in Italian.

Cesare Pavese

Cesare Pavese is the man who encouraged Rosa Calzecchi Onesti to translate Homer's works into modern Italian. Jhumpa envies Pavese's intimate knowledge of the Italian language.

Emily Dickinson

Emily Dickinson is one of the writers who helps Jhumpa through her journey as she struggles to write in Italian. A book of Dickinson's poems and letters translated into Italian serves as Jhumpa's muse.

Claudia and Marco

Claudia and Marco were Jhumpa's first Italian publishers. She met them at the Mantua literary festival. She believed they gave her the key to getting inside the Italian language by speaking to her in nothing but Italian once they learned that she wanted to get to know the language better.

Beatrice

Beatrice was Dante's inspiration for writing. Dante waited nine years to speak to Beatrice.



Objects/Places

A Lake

Jhumpa uses a lake across which she wishes to swim to represent her journey in learning to both speak and write in Italian.

Italy

Jhumpa describes three trips to Italy during the course of this story. She goes there first with her sister in 1994. It is during this trip to Florence that Jhumpa falls in love with the Italian language. In 2000 Jhumpa travels to Venice and a few months later is invited to the Mantua literary festival. It was at that festival that she met a couple of Italian publishers who helped improve her Italian by speaking to her only in that language. Jhumpa feels it is this couple who gives her the key to unlock the language she loves so much. Nearly 20 years after her first trip, Jhumpa and her family moved to Rome to live.

A Pocket Dictionary

When Jhumpa and her sister make their first trip to Italy this pocket dictionary is the first Italian book she bought. As she tries to understand the language during this first trip she describes that dictionary as being like an authoritative parent.

“Teach Yourself Italian”

Jhumpa buys herself this book but soon realizes that she can't learn Italian in this silent, solitary way.

Notebooks

Jhumpa uses notebooks often in the process of learning Italian. She first uses the notebook to make a personalized version of an Italian dictionary. She also uses the notebooks to write down the unfamiliar words she hears in Italian so she can learn them. According to Jhumpa these notebooks that she used are symbols of her enthusiasm for the Italian language.

Basket

Jhumpa describes herself as gathering up Italian words and storing them in a basket she carries with her. In this analogy the basket represents her memory.

A Library

It is in an unnamed library that Jhumpa had an entire story, in Italian, come into her mind. That story was her first Italian short story “The Exchange.” Jhumpa also conceived and wrote the book “In Other Words” in a library in a ghetto of Rome near the Portico di Ottavia.

“The Exchange”

“The Exchange” is the name of the first short story that Jhumpa wrote in Italian. The text of the story, which is about language, is included in Jhumpa’s book.

A Black Sweater

This black sweater is a major symbol in Jhumpa’s short story “The Exchange.” Jhumpa said that the sweater represents language.

Portico di Ottavia

This portico is located in one of Jhumpa’s favorite neighborhoods in Rome. She was so impressed by it that she used the ruins of the Portico di Ottavia as a setting in one of her stories. She believes that just like the Portico di Ottavia has scaffolding holding it up and supporting it, she also has support holding up her writing in Italian.



Themes

Language

The theme of language and Jhumpa's relationship with language is the most significant theme in this story. The plot of the book features Jhumpa's desire to learn to read, write and speak Italian. It details her journey as she struggles with the challenges of learning Italian and celebrates her milestones. Throughout the book, her relationships with languages - including Bengali and English - are discussed.

Jhumpa decides she wants to learn Italian when she first visits the country of Italy with her sister in 1994. She feels an unexplainable connection with the language that sparks her desire to learn it. Because she lives in America, Jhumpa struggles to learn the language she has decided she loves because after she has learned the basics of grammar and vocabulary there is no one with whom she can practice conversing.

Perhaps most challenging of Jhumpa's desire to learn the Italian language is her desire to have a working knowledge of that language. She doesn't want to just be able to get by, she wants to be able to hold up her end of a conversation in Italian. She describes that when she decides she wants to write in Italian, an activity in which she receives no prompts from others as she does in conversation, her goal seems even more unreachable.

Jhumpa, however, works to overcome the challenges associated with learning a foreign language. This book "In Other Words" details her process of learning Italian. In it she shares her insecurities associated with language as well as the way that language has been a comfort and source of accomplishment for her. She discusses how she approaches writing differently when she writes in Italian. She also shares the overwhelming joy she had when she saw the chapters from her book first published in an Italian magazine.

Identity

Because Jhumpa's identity is very much tied up in the languages that she speaks, identity is an important theme in this book. Jhumpa shares with her reader that she believes her identity is fractured even in her adulthood because she grew up speaking two languages. The addition of Italian doesn't seem to fix the cracks in Jhumpa's identity but gives her a language to work in that doesn't include the baggage that she associates with both the English and Bengali languages.

Jhumpa describes the trauma she associates with language from her childhood. She was the child of immigrants to America from India. Because her parents were not ready to give up their Indian culture they insisted that Jhumpa speak Bengali at home. It was the language she spoke before she went to school. However, Jhumpa never learned to read or write in Bengali, only to speak it. Even though she tried to speak the language



perfectly to please her parents, she said she always spoke with an accent that gave away the affect that her education in the English language had on her.

When Jhumpa was sent to school she was forced to begin learning to speak English. She indicates in her book this was a traumatic experience because she didn't feel comfortable speaking in that language and didn't understand much of what was said to her. It was not until Jhumpa began learning to read and write that she began to embrace the English language. Reading books and writing became her forms of consolation.

Even after she went to school Jhumpa's parents continued to insist that she speak Bengali, and not English, at home. For this reason, Jhumpa felt she developed two identities where language was concerned. At home and while under her parents supervision she spoke Bengali. At school she spoke English. She notes in the book that neither her teachers nor her friends knew she spoke a different language at home. She felt as if she were two different people, one at home and the other at school and in public.

Relationships

Even though Jhumpa is dealing with an inanimate object — in this case, a language — she writes about Italian as if it were another person. She describes herself as being in a relationship with that language. This relationship is described by Jhumpa in a variety of different ways as she tries to explain the way in which learning Italian affects her.

Jhumpa describes her initial attraction to the Italian language as the attraction to a lover. She feels as if she had fallen in love with the Italian language even though she did not know anything about it. She compares her feeling to love at first sight. At the end of the story she includes a short story about a husband who no longer feels the giddy excitement about his wife that he once did, but is happier in his solid relationship that in the beginning stages. This story may be an analogy to Jhumpa's relationship with Italian after she finished her book. Even though she doesn't have the excitement about it that she once did, she is happy in the long term relationship that has developed.

Jhumpa also refers to her relationship with the Italian language as one between a parent and a child. She sees herself as being a parental figure to her growing knowledge of Italian. Just as one would take an infant for regular checkups to monitor its growth, Jhumpa regularly checks the growth of her knowledge of Italian. When Jhumpa completes her first short story in Italian, she feels as if she has completed the birthing process. Finally in this mother-child relationship notice that Jhumpa also sees herself as being the mother of her English. She compares her English to a "hairy, smelly teenager" (p. 119) while her Italian is represented by an infant that needs constant care.

Translation

Translation is a theme that is touched on by Jhumpa as she writes her story. She discusses translation both from the viewpoint of translating a work from another



language into English and from the viewpoint of translating her own work in Italian into English.

First, Jhumpa tells her reader that she enjoys the act of reading a text in a foreign language. She says she believes the act of translating makes her reading feel more intimate. When she reads in Italian Jhumpa says she rediscovers the joy of reading. Her opinion of translating her own work from Italian to English is completely different. She sees very little positive in the job with the exception of helping her to clarify her writing in Italian. When she tries to translate her Italian into English Jhumpa realizes how weak her Italian vocabulary is in comparison to her English vocabulary. She felt that instead of doing a constructive work, she was actually regressing in her attempt to learn Italian.

Arrivals

The theme of arrivals is one that is briefly touched on in various places in Jhumpa's story. She starts her book with the analogy of the lake and her desire to swim to the other side. She compares it to her desire to be able learn the Italian language without having to depend on her English. In her analogy of the lake, Jhumpa, with the help of friends, finally reaches her goal of swimming across the lake. It is not as easy to conquer the Italian language. Even though Jhumpa makes a good deal of progress toward her goal in the course of writing her book, she does not seem to completely believe she has arrived.

In another part of the book she describes her knowledge of the Italian language as a bridge that takes her over the English language. She pictures herself standing in the middle of the bridge, not on either side of the canal, but suspended between her departure and arrival. It appears that Jhumpa has come to realize that she may never arrive at a complete knowledge of Italian, but that the learning process will continue.



Styles

Structure

The most significant feature of this story is that it is a bilingual book. The text is presented in both the English and Italian translations. In the printed book the left hand page contains the Italian text while the facing page contains the English translation. For those reading from an electronic reader there are markers after each section in both the English and Italian texts that takes the reader to the corresponding text in the other language.

The story is told in a linear fashion detailing how Jhumpa first grew acquainted with the Italian language, how she learned to speak it and her journey to write this book in that language. It is divided into 23 chapters. The chapters don't bear chapter numbers but instead have titles that summarize what that chapter will be about. The longest section is the one that includes the text of the first short story Jhumpa wrote in Italian. This section "The Exchange" is eight pages long. The first chapter of the book is among the shortest at only two pages.

Perspective

The majority of this story is told in the first person point of view and perspective of Jhumpa who tells her own story of learning to write in Italian. The story is autobiographical. Jhumpa refers to herself throughout the book as "I." Two chapters in the book are not told from Jhumpa's perspective. These chapters are "The Exchange" and "Half-Light." These chapters are both written from the perspective of a third person narrator. They are fictional stories written by Jhumpa.

Tone

The story is written in a subjective tone. Jhumpa's feelings are very much part of the story and are central in her desire to write a book in the Italian language. Because she was raised speaking both Bengali and English she has always felt as if she is fractured between two different worlds. She attributes the anxiety she deals with in her life to this division in her life. Jhumpa wants her reader to understand her struggles and triumphs as she studied Italian. She shares her feelings of stress, discouragement, disappointment and achievement as she experienced them through her journey.



Quotes

For twenty years I studied Italian as if I were swimming along the edge of that lake.”
-- Narrator (The Crossing paragraph 8)

Importance: Jhumpa uses the image of a lake across which she wishes to swim to help her reader understand her progress in learning the Italian language.

It seems like a language with which I have to have a relationship.”
-- Narrator (Love at First Sight paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote introduces the theme of Jhumpa’s developing relationship with Italian. At some points she indicates she believes the language wants nothing to do with her while in other parts she protects her growing knowledge of the language as one would protect an infant.

When you live in a country where your own language is considered foreign, you can feel a continuous sense of estrangement.”
-- Narrator (Exile paragraph 5)

Importance: Jhumpa describes to her reader her feelings of never having a language to which she belonged. She grew up speaking Bengali in America, a country where no one else knew that language. Her parents required her to speak only Bengali at home even though she was learning English at school and spoke it with her friends. As a result, she always felt as if she couldn’t really lay claim to any language.

I wonder why certain playwrights decided to set their tragedies, written in English, in Italian palaces. The thesis will discuss another schism between language and environment.”
-- Narrator (Exile paragraph 11)

Importance: It is when Jhumpa decides to write her thesis about English plays set in Italian palaces that she gives herself a legitimate reason to study Italian.

I’m about to become a linguistic pilgrim to Rome. I believe I have to leave behind something familiar, essential.”
-- Narrator (The Renunciation paragraph 3)

Importance: Part of Jhumpa’s preparation to go to Rome is her decision to stop reading in English. She feels she must leave behind English in order to immerse herself in Italian.

When I can’t remember words, I fear I’ve abandoned them.”
-- Narrator (Gathering Words paragraph 6)

Importance: In this quote Jhumpa uses personification to describe words. When she



forgets the words she collected in her basket with the intent to memorize them, Jhumpa feels as if she has abandoned those words. The use of the term “abandonment” makes it seem as if the words are somehow dependent upon Jhumpa remembering them in order for them to exist.

That Saturday, I do something strange, unexpected. I write my diary in Italian.”
-- Narrator (The Diary paragraph 7)

Importance: Jhumpa surprises herself by taking a big step in her process of learning Italian without even making a conscious effort. She begins writing her diary in Italian. She realizes this is because Italian has taken over as the language that she hears in her brain.

I think that a writer should observe the real world before imagining a nonexistent one.”
-- Narrator (The Story paragraph 2)

Importance: Jhumpa tells her reader that she used her own advice when she began trying to write stories in Italian, she writes about what she saw and experienced on a day-to-day basis.

When I write in Italian, I feel like an intruder, an impostor. The work seems counterfeit, unnatural.”
-- Narrator (The Fragile Shelter paragraph 2)

Importance: Jhumpa writing is made difficult not only because she struggles with the language but also because she struggles with the feeling that she is intruding on the language when she tries to write in it.

Maybe because from the creative point of view there is nothing so dangerous as security.”
-- Narrator (The Fragile Shelter paragraph 8)

Importance: Jhumpa believes one of the reasons she wants to learn to write in Italian is because she has grown so comfortable writing in English that she believes she has lost some of her creative edge.

To write in a new language, to penetrate its heart, no technology helps. You can’t accelerate the process, you can’t abbreviate it. The pace is slow, hesitant, there are no shortcuts.”
-- Narrator (Impossibility paragraph 6)

Importance: Despite all the technology available, Jhumpa tells her reader that there is none that can help speed the process of learning to write in a foreign language. For her it was such a slow and tedious process that she almost believed it was impossible.

The anxiety I felt, and still feel, comes from a sense of inadequacy, of being a disappointment.”



-- Narrator (The Imperfect paragraph 15)

Importance: Jhumpa admits to her reader that because she was never able to speak Bengali perfectly, she always felt like she was a disappointment to her parents. The sense of anxiety about language has followed her into her adult life.

I imagined that it would be an easy job. A descent rather than an ascent. Instead, I'm astonished at how demanding I find it."

-- Narrator (The Hairy Adolescent paragraph 3)

Importance: In her first attempt at translating one of her Italian works into English Jhumpa is surprised how difficult the work is. She had expected it to be a much easier process.

Now, as I translate myself, I feel like the mother of two children. I notice that I've changed my relation to the language, but maybe this change reflects a development, a natural journey."

-- Narrator (The Hairy Adolescent paragraph 8)

Importance: Developing her theme of relationships Jhumpa compares the English and Italian languages to two children. She says that while her Italian is in the infancy stages her English acts as a hairy adolescent from whom she feels she needs to protect the infant, representative of the progress she has made in Italian.

I feel more than ever that I am a writer without a definitive language, without origin, without definition."

-- Narrator (The Second Exile paragraph 10)

Importance: When Jhumpa returns to America for a visit after living a year in Rome, she is surprised at the disconnect she feels with the English language.

I realized that I had to speak both languages extremely well: the one to please my parents, the other to survive in America."

-- Narrator (The Triangle paragraph 5)

Importance: Because she lived with parents who did not want her to speak English at home yet she had to learn English because she lived in America, Jhumpa felt torn between two languages.



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the meaning of the story “The Exchange.” Jhumpa tells the reader that the black sweater represents language. With this in mind, what does the story say about language?

Topic 2

Discuss the meaning of the story “Half-Life.” Why do you think that Jhumpa includes it in her book? How does it relate to her journey?

Topic 3

Discuss the analogies that Jhumpa uses to help her reader understand her feelings and emotions as she goes through the process of learning to speak and read Italian. How do these analogies help the reader relate to Jhumpa’s struggle? Choose one analogy and discuss it specifically. Does it work? Why or why not?

Topic 4

Jhumpa first refers to her relationship with Italian as that of a lover. Later in her story she begins to have maternal feelings toward the language. Discuss her changing emotions toward her new language. What does this shift in affection represent?

Topic 5

How has language affected Jhumpa? In what ways does she think that language has caused her to be a divided, fragmented person?

Topic 6

In what ways has Jhumpa’s act of learning to write Italian been significant for her?

Topic 7

At what point in Jhumpa’s life did she fall in love with Italian? What obstacles did she face when she decided she wanted to learn to speak Italian?



Chapter 8

Discuss the “wall” that Jhumpa says she encountered in all three of the languages she spoke? What is your opinion of the wall? Do you think Jhumpa was responsible for its presence? Why or why not?

Topic 9

Discuss Jhumpa’s description of her first attempt at translating her own work in Italian.

Topic 10

Discuss the people to whom Jhumpa looked for inspiration. Who were some of her muses? Why did they inspire her?

Topic 11

Have you ever found yourself being critical of or impatient with a person from another country struggling to speak in English? Does this description of the difficulties one faces when learning a new language as an adult help you to better understand the struggles of a person trying to learn English? Why or why not?