

WHEREABOUTS AND ROMAN STORIES: A MIRROR OF ITALIAN SOCIETY **Dr. Rakesh Chandra, India**<https://doi.org/10.59009/ijllc.2025.0166>*Received Date:06 November 2025/Published Date:17 December 2025***ABSTRACT**

Renowned writer Jhumpa Lahiri has lately adapted the Italian language for writing purposes. Both these books, *Whereabouts* and *Roman Stories* have been written by her in Italian language. She has herself translated these books from Italian to English: the first by totally herself and the other one in collaboration. These books mainly focus on life in the city of Rome, the capital of Italy. She has tried to capture the hidden nuances of the rhythm of lives of the foreigners, especially the colored ones including the Indian diaspora. In both of her works, the tinge of sadness as well as the strong sense of exclusion, catch the attention of the readers. Living in a city of ancient antiquity and cultural ethos, the present-day situation is not cosy anyway. That raises some existential questions in the minds of the dwellers in the city: whether to live in the city and face ignominy and intolerance or leave the city as soon as possible to save one's skin. This paper tries to explore the depth of the continuing malaise of the outsiders living in Rome, and other aspects of her writing which come up prominently in her two works under consideration.

Keywords: Rome, Outsiders, Existential Questions, Ancient Civilization, Stories Without Names.

1. INTRODUCTION

Roman Stories and *Whereabouts* are the works of fiction penned by the renowned author Jhumpa Lahiri who is a winner of the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. This book has originally been written in Italian language which she has adapted lately, and been writing fiction, essays and poetry in Italian: *In Altre Parole* (In Other Words), *Il vestito dei libri* (The Clothing of Books), *Dove mi trovo* (self-translated as *Whereabouts*), *Il quaderno di Nerina*, and *Racconti romani*. *Whereabouts* is her first novel written in Italian, as well as her first time translation of a full-length work. Both of her above-mentioned works largely deal with the capital city of Italy, Rome. “The Pulitzer-winning writer has always had a special relationship with Rome-it is where she found a new language; where she charted an entirely new course in her intellectual life, writing exclusively in Italian.”¹ This is a city that encompasses the aroma of ancient civilizations. Rome is a city of parks, piazzas, museums, stores and coffee bars. Even then one can feel alone and lost in this big, historical city. “But the Rome she portrays in this collection of nine stories, (six of which she has translated herself from the original Italian to English. The other three have been done by Todd Portnowitz) is more noir, less romantic.”² Though there is no guarantee of mental peace and the presence of ‘feel good factor’ in big, modern cities where innumerable places of interests, shimmering lights, and eateries serving a variety of food exist, the soulful twittering of nightingale, so to say, are often found missing. This feeling of ‘being alone’ is intense and vividly captured in the words of the author herself: “The city doesn't beckon or lend me a shoulder today. Maybe it knows I'm about to leave. The sun's dull disk

defeats me; the dense sky is the same one that will carry me away. That vast and vaporous territory, lacking precise pathways, is all that binds us together now. But it never preserves our tracks. The sky, unlike the sea, never holds on to the people that pass through it. The sky contains nothing of our spirit, it doesn't care. Always shifting, altering its aspects from one moment to the next, it can't be defined." (Whereabouts) Very true, indeed! Either the movement of the sun or the sky, even the vast territory where we travel throughout our sojourn, can't be deciphered in advance, and one has to weave the magic daily on his own desires and aspirations. In her novel *Whereabouts*, the author, while celebrating mundane and ordinary life, goes on exploring her existential questions simultaneously. The central character of this novel, a lady, is in a dilemma to choose between stasis and movement. Her thought process wavers between belonging to one place or to form lasting ties with the place and the people. Undoubtedly, these are existential questions which churn the minds of the lady. Then, the question arises: What is the alternative or what is exactly required to live a peaceful and happy life? She frequents the swimming pools as usual and visits the rail station that leads to her mother, who feels in the strong grip of solitude after her husband's untimely death. On the way, she meets her colleagues with whom she feels ill at ease, and casual acquaintances. Strangely, a shadow of 'him' also appears on the horizon that consoles and unsettles her turn by turn. Ultimately, one day, her perspective abruptly changes when she feels 'overwhelmed and replenished' by the sun's life-giving spark. Her novel is a vivid and lively depiction of urban solitude in a well-crafted and nuanced style of her own. In this context, one more question catches our immediate attention: Whether moving constantly from one destination to the other can soften our inherent feelings of loneliness? As per author's version, a big no! She herself describes the situation in her novel's chapter "Nowhere" as such: "I could be riding a train or traveling by car or flying in a plane, among the clouds that drift and spread on all sides like a mass of jellyfish in the air. I've never stayed still. I've always been moving, that's all I've ever been doing. Always waiting either to go somewhere or to come back. Or to escape. I keep packing and unpacking the small suitcases at my feet. I hold my purse in my lap, it's got some money and a book to read. Is there any place we're not moving through? Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around. I'm related to these terms."³ The message is loud and clear that escapism is no answer to our loneliness. Maybe one has to abide by the rules of everyday life being followed by ordinary people! If a city like Rome, having a string of cupolas, piazzas, museums, ancient monuments and the underlying visions of modern life cannot hold anyone's interest in life then what else needs to be done? That is really a question of which answer varies from person to person. At the same time, the old existential issue remains unsolved! At the same time, it is interesting to know her own views about the book *Whereabouts*: There are all sorts of introspective literature and first-person narratives. I had never written a novel in the first person before. So, I was curious to see where this might go. Any first-person narrative can be very explanatory, very interior, and this is an interior novel."⁴ She has also introduced a novel female protagonist who remains anonymous throughout. She is also 'free of any defining cultural history'. In the same interview, she has shed light on this character as such: "The book was written in Rome, when I was still there until August of 2015. That whole winter, spring, summer, I was first exploring this character and then I kept revisiting her when I would revisit the city. I think it may give the reader a greater freedom to think about her and to think about what it means to call somebody Italian or American, or any nationality for that matter. To take away labels like this can be an interesting way to approach how we think about each other, and ourselves."⁵ Certainly, in that case the people would talk or see each other as human beings only, and not a representative of any caste, creed, nationality or religion or so. Undoubtedly,

that would be an ideal solution to many of the vexatious problems we are facing as human beings.

Roman Stories, on the other hand, is a vivid reflection of Italian lifestyle, both in urban spaces and rural or sub-urban areas adjacent to the cities. In the Italian lifestyle, family and community are a priority. They enjoy fresh food and focus on a slower pace of life. They prefer a structured family in which they often live with their parents longer. They like long, multi-course meals and social interactions. Italians are often more direct and straightforward in their communication which appears to be blunt sometimes. A poignant story "P's Parties" reflects beautifully the fabric of social life where communication, social interaction, good food and drinks including coffee etc. where a Roman couple, having no progenies, find comfort and community with foreigners at their friend's yearly birthday gathering, until the husband crosses a line. In a city where everyone is cheating on others, such dalliance by the husband with a foreigner, a girl whom he, the husband, visualized as his one-time love, was an unpardonable act in the eyes of his wife-a long-time partner. Everyone close to P's acquaintances including friends and foreigners eagerly waited for her invitation for the New Year's Eve party where the invitees spent their time in blissful surroundings. One prominent feature of such parties has been the seaside beach activities away from the household pools. In another interesting story, "The Steps", there lies a public staircase that connects two neighborhoods and the residents who climb up and down it. In this story, one can see the capital city of Italy, Rome in all of its social and cultural diversity and social traits, and also some of its concerns. From a bare reading of this story, one comes across a lingering fear induced by the incidents of house theft and other petty criminal activities prevalent there. There are random acts of aggression that stand out as grey moles in the otherwise peaceful and calm atmosphere where life goes on at a leisurely pace. There seems to be no hurry of any sort. The Steps especially highlights this aspect amidst the happenings of social interactions and easy communications amongst the people. These stories are searching and portray the life of people in a metropolis like Rome. However, her stories are not confined to the city only. The story "The Boundary" deals with family vacations in the countryside. However, the two most poignant stories of this collection are "Well-lit House" and "The Delivery" which straightaway deal with the condition of a foreigner or an outsider in Rome. "It is the story of nameless foreigners-outsiders-trying to find a foothold in a city that is lonely and less than inviting, sometimes even openly, brazenly hostile, to them."⁶ The first story vividly describes the travails of a young man who after a pathetic stint of living in immigration camps and shared accommodation, ultimately finds an apartment of his own in a low-income neighborhood on the outskirts of Rome. There he lives with his wife and five children, but his new place of living could not become a home for him. An atmosphere reeking of offensive animosity forces his wife and children to leave. He also left his apartment and wandered from place to place the whole day. In the night he took shelter beneath a tree where his inner feelings so eloquently express the plight of an outsider in such a big city as Rome: "My eyes were closed, but behind my eyelids the world was neither dark nor still, there was constant movement, a target encircled by more circles, and at one point I envisioned my wife, her eyes and cheekbones, her wonderfully curved eyebrows, even her soft smile. It was a peaceful face. More mask than a face, really. And yet I saw her in that apparition, that mirage was not alone. I thought of my wife and her fear of giant trees that fall and kill people out of the blue. I wanted to tell that this tree did nothing but protect me, with no angry cicadas to leap from its leaves and cling to my hand, and that its sturdy, exposed roots were like a dark valley glimpsed from a distance."⁷ "The Delivery" is another story which depicts the shooting of a dark-skinned young woman who had gone outside to collect a parcel for her employer. The teenager is heard saying, "It's only to scare them, it's not like she'll die from it."⁸ She is also

subjected to ignominious remarks by two boys on the motorino passing by, “Go wash those dirty legs.”⁹

In an interview, she says, “Ironically, the writing of the book in English has gone against the expectation of some people because I draw more light to the darker sides of the city which people don't really want to seek out. So, it made some people feel like she doesn't really know the city.”¹⁰ A very natural though interesting observation from the local people who often don't like to see the dark patches in the broad picture of their favourite city. In this context, she made another observation explaining the reason for such a narrative: “The stories in this book (Roman Stories) were written more or less at the same time as Whereabouts. So, these two books grew together. I think one was more of an interior journey and the other was another side of me observing and responding to things that were happening out in the world-reactions towards immigration, towards episodes of racially motivated violence, all of these kinds of things.”¹¹ She is honest in her approach towards her social responsibilities and as a writer, she has portrayed the social anomalies candidly through her stories too.

Overall, her two books written in Italian, are a riveting portrayal of Italian life in general, and its good and bad aspects. These stories are slow in pace but retain the flavour of storytelling. Both her works are worth reading as significant works of literature serving as food for thought, to say the least, in reference to some urgent and necessary existential questions of our time.

REFERENCE

1. Paromita Chakrabarti, The Stranger in The Mirror, The Indian Express, Dec 24, 2023.
2. Ibid.
3. Page 153, Whereabouts.
4. Paromita Chakrabarti, In Other Worlds, Other Wonders, The Indian Express, May 16, 2021.
5. Ibid.
6. Paromita Chakrabarti, The Stranger in The Mirror, The Indian Express, Dec 24, 2023.
7. “Well-lit House, page no. 79-80.
8. Page 134.
9. Page 131.
10. Paromita Chakrabarty, The Stranger in the Mirror, The Indian Express, Dec 24, 2023.
11. Ibid.