

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

The Complexities of Diasporic Existence: Redefining Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Mr’s Sen’s” from *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “Mrs. Sen’s” from her debut collection *Interpreter of Maladies* in the light of diasporic conditions. Like most of Lahiri’s characters, Mrs. Sen is a Bengali Indian living in America and thus has to go through the struggle of assimilation while dealing with the complexities of dual identity. Thus, this paper shall explore and discuss theories on diaspora, cultural hybridization, Bhaba’s theory on third space and pay close attention to the protagonist’s Indian American Identity. It shall also take a close look at the word diaspora, and its varied definitions while discussing the protagonist’s diasporic complexities from both psychological and sociological viewpoints.

Keywords: Assimilation, Complexities, Diaspora, Dilemma, Identity Crisis.

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* is a paradigm of immigrant experiences. It is a collection of nine short stories, tightly knit in a gripping narrative. Her detailed description, minute observation and the perfect blend of the expected and the unexpected is what makes it so familiar yet an extraordinary text. In this collection, she not only portrays the crisis of diasporic lives but also questions and highlights on the sensitivity of these 'in between' lives. Almost all the stories, in this collection, discuss the lives of Bengali Indians living in America; most of the characters belong to the educated class and have financially secured backgrounds. Through her characters, she describes the lives of the first and second generations of Indian immigrants who have settled in America; and are dealing with the different complexities of their diasporic existence. "Mrs. Sen's" is a distinguished story from her, noteworthy short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*, which also quintessentially reflects on the similar ideas like the struggles of assimilation, the dilemma of the dual existence and very vividly- identity crisis. Lahiri meticulously portrays the diasporic struggle of Mrs. Sen and highlights how like all her protagonists, Mrs. Sen's psyche is also in a continuous process of renegotiating her diasporic existence, in order to reinforce a rigid identity.

Diaspora has become a major talk in the field of literature and serious concerns have been shown to theorize diaspora over the past century. Many theorists came forward to opine their ideas on diaspora and categorized it on the basis of the reasons behind the migration. Among many definitions and meanings of diaspora, one of the dominant ways of its usage is to refer to link cross-border experiences of the homeland with a destination. In other words, the term refers to individuals who live in different parts of the world but identify collectively with one another, with the countries from which they or their ancestors originated, and with the society in which they currently reside. As Agnew argues, "scholars who define diaspora by its social consciousness refer to individuals who live in a variety of societies and cultures and

who emphasize their sense of belonging or exclusion, their states of mind and their sense of identity.” Almost all of Lahiri’s writings, including “Mrs. Sen’s” are apt to analyze in this context of a social consciousness which focuses on the process of assimilation and prioritizes the idea of identity.

Though, apparently, diaspora might be termed simply as the “dispersal of people from its original homeland” (Butler) but, with the emergence of time the idea did not remain confined to just dispersal rather referred to as the “cultural transformation or acculturation of the immigrants” (Cohen). The foremost problem that any immigrant faces in a new land are cultural shock. They cannot assimilate into the new culture as soon as they land. They need a few days or months or even years to absorb them. In some cases, it can be evident that cultural shock becomes a strong reason for the immigrants to move back to their native country. Lahiri’s Mrs. Sen is one such immigrant whose diasporic psyche compels her to look at her identity at the backdrop of her physical and geographical displacement and experience the struggle of assimilation.

Lahiri’s Mrs. Sen essentially goes through what Bhabha describes as the third space, theorizing the concept of deconstructing identity, - “They live in the Third Space, characterized by in betweenness. No purist view of identity applies to them because entering another culture they are “neither the One...nor the other but something else besides which contests the terms and territories of both” (Bhabha 41).

Lahiri lets Mrs. Sen grow in this ‘foreign third space’, and makes her face the vulnerabilities as well as the opportunities of belonging to two different cultures. Lahiri vividly portrays, how Mrs. Sen gets entangled in an emotional turmoil, helplessly traps herself between Indian traditions and the conventions of the adopted culture, how she tries to establish her individual identity and explore relationships in a new milieu; experiencing at the same time the

sense of displacement, alienation, isolation and intergenerational gap which ultimately forms her diasporic sensibility.

“Mrs. Sen’s” is one of the most significant stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, which depicts the situation of being caught up in the in-betweenness of the dual culture, of being physically present in America, but being absolutely absent psychologically. Mrs. Sen is a thirty-year-old housewife, living in America with her husband, who is a professor of mathematics and who is extremely busy all the time. As a result, Mrs. Sen is left alone and feels very lonely, as she has to spend her time in the university residence all by herself. It is to be noted that, she has to adopt an individualistic society in America but was accustomed to a collectivist one in India. This process of adapting to the new culture makes her sense of loneliness acute and the struggle she goes through to reconcile with her new identity becomes extreme. Unlike other Lahiri characters such as Shobha from “A Temporary Matter” and Twinkle from “This Blessed House” Mrs. Sen lacked a network of fellow immigrants who would try to expel the feelings of not belonging to this foreign land. Thus, the steps she takes to assimilate are all done without any enthusiasm or encouragement. Perhaps among all Lahiri characters Mrs. Sen struggles the most with the hardships of assimilation and takes an extreme emotional toll with the process of dealing with her diasporic identity.

To get rid of her loneliness, Mr. Sen suggests her to take driving lessons. However, she ends up being a baby-sitter of an American kid, Eliot. Eliot, being the child of a single working mother, needs a baby-sitter and has had babysitters in the past before Mrs. Sen. Since Mrs. Sen was still learning how to drive, it was decided that Mrs. Sen would look after Eliot in her own apartment. It was within Eliot that she found a little peace, as she could continuously talk to him about India, telling him about the culture and people that she left back. She always referred to India as “home”, and talked nostalgically about every particular thing that she missed so much while living in America. Her phrases like “At home, you know. We have a

driver” (Lahiri 113) or “ At home that is all you have to do, not everybody has a telephone but just rise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind and one whole neighborhood and half of another has come to share the news to help with arrangements” (Lahiri 115). Though it took some time, yet through their everyday interactions and daily conversation, Eliot finally realized that, “When Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (Lahiri 116). Her physical displacement from India made her live in some kind of “past-present” (Bhabha). By repeatedly cherishing her life back at home, her past kept blending into her present and thus she drastically fails to accept and acculturate with her present identity.

Mrs. Sen’s Indian identity acted as a block factor in her process of assimilation. She was torn between two countries and two cultures, but what kept her moving was her Indian-ness. Instead of consciously participating in the assimilation process by picking up the American ways of life and culture, she kept cherishing and reinforcing her Indian characteristics. Her Indian habits, lifestyle, the way she dressed and the food she cooked, everything defined her Indian identity. Her house was just another Indian house with well-come foot mat at the main door, the TV and telephone covered by places of yellow fabric with scalloped edges, or her use of a blade instead of a knife while cutting vegetables only reinforced her Indian culture in this foreign land. She remained as much Indian as possible. She always wore a saree and her vermilion and cooked timely for her and her husband, considering it to be an important Indian-wife factor. For her, buying fresh fish was of utmost importance because fish is intimately connected to her Bengali-identity, something she desperately kept holding on to. As a result of this conscious and deliberate practice of Indian habits, Ms. Sen was necessarily in denial of accepting her new identity. In other words, her Indian ways of life acted as a hindrance in the process of her assimilation. By being so closely attached to her Indian habits she was necessarily blocking the acculturation process which M.J. Esman defines

as “acceptance and adaptation of basic elements of the local culture, its language and its lifestyle” (103). and the affliction that she bears in her mind is alienation defined as “out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person” (Fromm).

Mrs. Sen was essentially lonely and thus her daily chores was designed as an opportunity to escape the complexities that she was facing as a diasporic individual. She kept delaying her driving lessons which was necessary, but had all the enthusiasm for cooking daily, in spite of the fact that, it was only she and Mr. Sen that had to eat. The identity crisis she was going through was gradually becoming intense, and so her efforts to reassert her cultural identity was also becoming desperate. It was through her cooking, her interest in buying fish and vegetables, her dressing up typically in an Indian fashion and her rigorously holding on to the Indian customs and cultural practices that made her feel connected to the home she left behind. She consciously tried to create a home in America, -which was by all means unquestionably Indian. It was through these activities that she was asserting her own sense of home and cultural identity and trying to escape the alienation, the loneliness, the identity crisis and most importantly her diasporic dilemma that she had been facing. Mrs. Sen treated her American identity as the other and vehemently denied to accept it. She half-heartedly, tried to get accustomed to the American ways but was in continual denial of accepting this hyphenated identity. As Homi Bhaba states, “The disavowal of the Other (or the Self) always exacerbates the edge of identification . . . for denial is always a retroactive process; a half acknowledgement of that otherness has left its traumatic mark” (88).

Mrs. Sen’s profound alienation, the deep pathos of bearing this torn identity actually echoes the struggle of every immigrant, who is trying to fit in the individualistic American culture. Commenting on Mrs. Sen’s deep sense of not belonging, Nandini Sahu elaborates – “Lahiri manages to portray so well the confusion and despair a young Indian wife feels so far from home. Her anxiety for letters from her kith and kin from her motherland, hare blade for

Indian, her Indian dishes-fish curry, family members. Voice on the tape recorder during her farewell and many other things reflect the pathos of an expatriate Indian” (67).

Discussing about the pertaining themes in Lahiri’s writings Noelle Brada Williams states that “this sense of belonging to a particular place and culture and, yet, at the same time, being an outsider to another, creates a tension in the individuals which happens to be a distinguishing feature of Lahiri’s characters” (4) and Mrs. Sen seems to be the epitome of such tensions. She is culturally displaced, her homesickness, her nostalgia and her constant cultural collisions only deepens her pathos and her longing to go back home. She tells Eliot that how she never thought of a life like this so far away from home “When I was your age I was without knowing that one day I would be so far” (Lahiri123) The reality of her diasporic existence only deepens the pain with her confession to Eliot “Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (Lahiri115). Her desperateness to go back home is shown in her regret of not being around her newborn nephew, to whom Mrs. Sen shall only be a stranger or the tone in her voice when she asks Eliot if she could drive all the way to Calcutta if she learnt driving, -“Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (Lahiri119).

She knows the impossibilities of such desperate dreams, yet her heart longs to go back to what she calls, home. She doesn’t understand how much of America to take and how much of India to reject in order to come to terms with her identity. She delves deep into the layers of diasporic realities, leaving herself in a state of an absolute identity crisis.

Lahiri also juxtaposes Mrs. Sen’s character, with the character of Eliot’s mother. The warmth, of affection Mrs. Sen gave, was also very Indian in character. She used to give Eliot, food to eat which was outside her official obligations, used to carry his plate after his meals, and talk to him in a motherly friendly way, which was unlike Eliot’s mother in particular and American mothers in general. Eliot seemed to be her surrogate son, her emotional shelter, and

her escape from alienation. Through Mrs. Sen's words and her affection towards Eliot Lahiri describes how the modern materialistic world is losing all the emotional factors, and Mrs. Sen's realization of such hollowness in the American culture, which she is supposed to adopt and identify with, only makes her feel at a loss and heightens her identity crisis. She realizes that being alone is the ultimate truth of life, and unlike her Eliot is experiencing it at a very early stage. She identifies her pangs of staying away from her motherland, with Eliot's sorrow of being away from his mother.

Everyone, this people, too much in their world. When I think of you, only a boy, separated from your mother for so much of the day, I am ashamed.... You already taste the way things must be. (Lahiri123)

The story, however, ends with the separation of Mrs. Sen and Eliot, due to the accident Mrs. Sen causes with her poor driving skills, while going to buy fish. Mrs. Sen is not only sad, but also holds herself responsible for the entire mishap and feels extremely guilty. In her enthusiasm to buy fresh fish and her continual denial to develop her driving skills, she lost her only emotional shelter in this foreign land. In other words, her diasporic reality and her strong urge to deny the complexity of that reality seized away her last mind-space of feeling a little at home. By losing her job, and all her connections to Eliot she once again feels lost in this already lost country. The way Lahiri portrays Mrs. Sen's struggle reinforces the universal feeling of homesickness; but at the same time, Mrs. Sen and her struggles are completely unique in terms of emotional attachment. Perhaps, her attachment to Eliot, and her mother-like affection towards the child is exclusively Indian. But Eliot and Mrs. Sen's relationship, cannot be categorized only in a single mother-son dimension. Apart from sharing the motherly warmth with Eliot, she also treated him as a companion and expected him to understand the emotional turmoil she was going through, and perhaps Eliot was more of a companion than of a child to her. Thus, breaking away bonds with him, meant breaking away with the little amount of peace

that she had found in America. Losing all bonds with Eliot Mrs. Sen is thus, left with a greater sense of loneliness, alienation and identity crisis, - bearing the burden of a diasporic dilemma “Mrs. Sen’s” is outstanding in terms of defining a varied range of diasporic experience. The cultural clash, the pangs of physical and psychological displacement, the never-ending loneliness and alienation leading to identity crisis are all held together in this single story. The precarious way, Lahiri’s Mrs. Sen endeavours to balance herself between home and abroad, negotiates her existence, and deals with the dilemma of this dual existence, makes her an epitome of diasporic complexities, where she is in a constant process of questioning and redefining her identity.

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