

Interpreting the Maladies of the Woman Abroad: A Study of ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ from Jhumpa Lahiri’s Interpreter of Maladies

¹Dr. G. Aruna

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Indian Arts and Science College, Tiruvannamalai-2

Abstract

Diasporic Literature deals with the loss of identity, the sense of rootlessness and the resulting emotional conflicts faced by immigrants everywhere. This paper aims to study the reasons behind the neurosis and alienation faced by the women characters who have relocated to America in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Pulitzer Prize winning anthology of short stories *The Interpreter of Maladies*. It focuses on two short stories from the collection viz., ‘The Interpreter of Maladies’ and ‘Mrs. Sen’s’. It tries to measure the neurosis caused by cultural displacement and the resulting sense of a broken self. While Mrs. Das, the protagonist of ‘The Interpreter of Maladies’, finds herself to be a misfit in her own country, trapped in a loveless marriage and wracked by a sense of guilt, Mrs. Sen, in ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ is constantly seen to be pining over the country she had left behind - its food, people, colors and even its riotous noise. She is seen recreating a microcosmic motherland in her small university residential quarters and gradually folds over to the bottled-up trauma of cultural isolation. The paper tries to interpret the maladies of the two women characters in these short stories, that is, memories of a motherland left far behind and an intense desire to belong. It is seen that these women lead empty lives, putting up brave facades but suffering from an absolute sense of meaninglessness.

Keywords: Diasporic Literature, Interpreter, immigrants.

INTRODUCTION

Diaspora, drawn from the Greek ‘dispersal’ and the Hebrew ‘Exile’, originally referred the exodus and dispersal of the Jewish community outside Palestine. “The term ‘diaspora’ refers to “the voluntary “or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions”

(Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 61). The industrial and the post industrial era saw a huge number of people migrating to different countries in search of prosperity. There are different diasporas around the world, the Indian diaspora being a significant one. The diasporic people share certain features in common, viz., cultural isolation, loss of identity, intense nostalgia for their country’s culture and cuisine, a longing to return to the homeland and alienation resulting from a lack of cultural

assimilation in their new countries. There are many notable diasporic writers, like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Monica Ali, Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri, who portray the struggles of the diasporic population.

This paper focuses on a short story ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ from Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, where Jhumpa Lahiri flawlessly captures the plight of women, who suffer from a self-imposed exile as they go abroad along with their husbands. ‘Mrs Sen’ portrays a young bengali wife confined to her apartment and her eventual breakdown. The eponymous Mrs. Sen is married to a professor who spends the best part of his days teaching classes and comes home only to have food and the occasional trips outside. Mrs. Sen is introduced to the reader through the eyes of

Eliot, a 11-year-old American boy to whom the former plays the role of a caretaker after school. Though settled in America, Mrs. Sen is dressed like a typical Indian woman, in “a shimmering white saree patterned with yellow paisleys” (Lahiri 112) which is in stark contrast to Eliot's mother who has cropped hair and shorts. Mr Sen has been giving her driving lessons so that she may be independent and do the shopping herself. This very fact seems to bother Mrs Sen. She casually says that they have a chauffeur back in her home. i.e., India; The very mention of the native land brings out a subtle emotional reaction in her. Lahiri catches it perfectly in the following description:

“Yes I am learning,” Mrs. Sen said. “But I am a slow student. At home, you know we have a driver”. “You mean a chauffeur?” Mrs.Sen glanced at Mr.Sen, who nodded. Eliot’s mother nodded, too, looking around the room. ‘And that’s all...in India?’ “Yes,” Mrs .Sen replied. The mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She neatened the border of her sari where it rose diagonally across her chest. She, too, looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. “Everything is there”. (Lahiri 113).

Mrs. Sen tries to duplicate India in her American apartment, right from the hospitality, the knick-knacks in the room to the flat soled slippers with a leather ring to hold the toe. Eliot watches her as an exotic phenomenon, mildly interested in everything she does. Every afternoon, Mrs. Sen spreads newspapers on the floors and chops vegetables for an elaborate dinner. She uses a typical curved Indian blade which was hinged on to a narrow wooden base and with a serrated crest. This seemingly ordinary tool used for chopping and grating is a bridge to the motherland that is left behind.

She has brought the blade from India, where apparently there was atleast one in every household. “Whenever there is a wedding in the family.” She told Eliot one day.”or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and

then they sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night”... “It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter.” (Lahiri 115)

It is understood that she keenly misses these all women sessions and the friendly chatter. After becoming used to such noise in her motherland, Mrs. Sen finds the silence reigning over the neighborhood to be weird and disturbing. She confides in Eliot, “Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (Lahiri 115). Her breakdown is gradual and is brought on by a lack of a sense of belongingness, the constant feeling of being a foreigner. Her inability to reconcile herself to the new culture and the intense longing to have a life that would be normal. She feels lost in all the silence that surrounds her. She wonders whether anyone would come to her aid, if she screamed at the top of her lungs. She reminisces that in India, people would come just at a call. “At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But just raise 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 116).

It is a ritual for Mrs. Sen to recreate the food culture of the motherland. Every night, she prepares an elaborate dinner even though it is only for two. “Brimming bowls and colanders lined the countertop, spices and pastes were measured and blended, and eventually a collection of broths simmered over periwinkle flames on the stove. It was never a special occasion, nor was she ever expecting company. It was merely dinner for herself and Mr.Sen” (Lahiri 117). She also dresses herself in a typical Bengali style, taking care to adorn her parting with bright vermilion which Eliot at first mistakes to be a kind of gash. Mrs.Sen also extends the typical Indian hospitality to Eliot’s mother, offering her tea and various delicacies which is rejected with an equally typical western xenophobia.

Mrs.Sen is forced to learn driving in her new country, because she has to be

independent. Unlike in her motherland, no one might just lend a helping hand and she has to do her shopping by herself. Venturing out in as strange land amidst people who probably view her as a specimen is a huge burden on Mrs. Sen. She is a nervous driver which is magnified by the new traffic and driving rules in America.

Jhumpa Lahiri portrays how Mrs. Sen longs for the comforting presence of her relatives. Hailing from an extended family, the eerie solitude weighs upon her and Eliot is the only confidante and friend she has. Mrs. Sen is shown to possess an audio cassette which has a recording of the voices of all her relatives including her mother as a farewell present. "Another day she played a cassette of people talking in her language - a farewell present, she told Eliot, that her family had made for her. As the succession of voices laughed and said their bit, Mrs. Sen identified each speaker. "My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather." One speaker sang a song. Another recited a poem. The final voice on the tape belonged to Mrs. Sen's mother" (Lahiri 128).

Mrs. Sen treasures the occasional letters she receives from home and is heartbroken that she cannot visit her sister and her new born child. She rues the fact that the child will not recognise her when she visits India after her husband gets his tenure. She is not able to attend her grandfather's funeral Mrs. Sen shuts herself up in her room for days and there is no cooking in the house. She constantly yearns to go back to India. Her motive behind learning to drive a car seems to be to get away to Calcutta. She asks Eliot, "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take, Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (Lahiri 119). She plays Indian music and draws consolation from her expeditions to stop fish but even that does not satisfy her.

The tragedy of Mrs. Sen is that while all her relatives think that she has procured the magical key to happiness and is living in a state of bliss she is alone and miserable completely dependent on her husband. In a moment of desperation, she takes the little boy to her wardrobe and pulls out all her rich sarees that

are lying unused there "when have I ever worn this one? And this?" She tossed the saris one by one from the drawers, then pried several from their hangers. They landed like a pile of tangled sheets on the bed. The room was filled with an intense smell of mothballs" (Lahiri 125). That is Mrs. Sen's reality, while her relatives back in India think that she a picture perfect life. A very poignant statement from Mrs. Sen comes as follows: "Send pictures," they write. "Send pictures of your new life." What picture can I send?" ...They think I live the life of a queen Eliot." She looked around the blank walls of the room. "They think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace" (Lahiri 125)

The deterioration of Mrs. Sen is gradually brought on. The calm Mrs. Sen grows to be impetuous and more vocal. As she strikes up a friendship with Eliot, she bestows upon him confidences that she is normally not wont to. Her hatred and fear of driving culminate in a minor accident. Mr. Sen decides to send Eliot away, thereby effectively removing the one friend and confidante from Mrs. Sen's life. It is not difficult to imagine her future: a silent wraith-like figure, haunting her house, drained of the courage and the will to be herself in their chosen land.

'Mrs. Sen's' effortlessly portrays the trials of a semi-literate woman forced to go abroad with her husband. She is forced to babysit, probably the only job that she is fit for, that will bring in the extra bucks. Isolated and separated from the well-known neighborhood and the empathy of friends and relatives, deprived of the affection of her family, Mrs. Sen is a generic prototype of the diasporic woman who is lost in the smells, sounds, sights and tastes in the crevices of her memory. It is to be noted that Jhumpa Lahiri purposely denies her a first name, refusing to give her a separate identity than that of the countless Mrs. Sen's who are also lost somewhere between Boston and Bengal. Mrs. Sen puts up a brave front and tries her utmost to be the good wife carrying out her husband's wishes and getting acclimatized to the new environment. It is also to be noted that her husband is not a source of strength or support to her. In fact, he is hardly

seen about the house, spending most of his time in the college campus teaching, trying to win his tenure and securing the future while his wife undergoes a psychological trauma within the four walls of their home. He also puts pressure on her to learn to drive and get her license so that she will not be pester him to go shopping for fish. Eliot is the only witness to her pain and suffering. Poorly adjusted and ill-equipped to strike a balance, Mrs.Sen's break down is typical.

In the *Interpreter of Maladies*, Lahiri also hints at the problems that the diasporic women face like that of Laxmi's cousin in 'Sexy'. In this story, Lahiri deals with infidelities and the extra marital affairs that Indian men have with American Women. Men walking out of marriages for the other women is a ubiquitous phenomenon, but the betrayed diasporic woman's condition is even more pathetic, given her alienation and isolation. Reverting back to Mrs. Sen's, it is easy for the reader to imagine the future of the Sens' marriage. An ill matched couple, who suffer each other silently, both walk a tightrope. Mr. Sen, a rational and cold gentleman, expects a transformation in his wife who is pining to go back to the luxurious lanes and bylanes of her homeland. He could be the next husband going down the damning road of adultery. In short, Lahiri seems to have written this story to create a model tale that depicts the problems of a woman in a diasporic setting.

References

- [1] Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The key concepts*. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- [2] Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Diaspora Theory and Transnationalism*. India: Orient Blackswan, 2019. Print.
- [3] Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. London: 4th Estate Publishers, 2021. Print.
- [4] London:Routledge. 2007. Print.