

Ms. Sumeet Brar

Assistant Professor

P.G. Department of English

**SCG Government College
Ludhiana, Punjab, India**

**The Hyphenated Identity of Women in Indo-American Society:
A Selective Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri's
Mrs. Sen's**

ABSTRACT:

The Indian diasporic writers have carved out a unique spot for themselves on the literary spectrum. Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri hold a prominent position amongst them. They have given voice to marginalised migrated women who are burdened with the load of native culture and traditions. The traditional Indian codes and customs are enforced on them to maintain the cultural purity at home. They are encumbered with the responsibility of maintaining Indianness, whether they so desire or not. The present paper is an attempt to study two similar circumstances presented in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" and the character's response to the stifling circumstances.

KEY WORDS: Diaspora, Women, Marginalization, Assimilation

INTRODUCTION:

With the turn of the millennium, Indian diaspora is emerging as a powerful entity at the economic, political, cultural and literary front. Till recently this community embittered by the 'unofficial glass ceiling' was only giving voice to the feeling of nostalgia and rootlessness through their narrative, but now being on firmer footing the shade and tone of literature has also undergone a change. This erstwhile invisible minority of contemporary South Asian diasporic

writers is asserting itself in the literary circles by challenging this forced invisibility. Although they are still on the periphery of the mainstream culture and literature, they are providing a privileged space that produces subversive narratives, which confer the question of American and South Asian identity and they are striving to move from periphery to the centre. As a result, this body of writing has developed not only in discernability, but also more significantly in realization. Today, courses in Asian-American literature, common throughout U.S. higher education are providing a platform to these writers to disseminate their ideas. Their writings tell us that so-called 'marginalised' and 'ethnic' literature is the literature that is making its presence felt as the ubiquitous, impossible-to-disregard spaces in a society and literature. Actually it is this literature, which eventually delineates, redefines, modifies, gives novel contours and introduces new facets of the literature. It is a periphery that cannot be overlooked because it is where the voices are neither mute nor frail.

Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are very important Amerindian literary figures. Both of them discuss the issue of hyphenated identities in their fiction. It is a lived reality for them, a part of their existence, they neither can nor want to evade. Both of them have settled in America, California to be precise and have their roots in Bengal. They have niched a unique literary spot for themselves i.e. being the writers of Indian origin, located overseas, writing mostly as a voice for 'India born Americans (Amerindians) and their children'. Refusal to accept the identity forced by the host nation and distance from their native culture has complicated their identity issues and it has got a vent in the form of writing. It is used as an instrument to give expression to this perennial struggle of the third world immigrants in their attempt to assimilate into North American life style. They articulate the in-between condition of the marginalized population for whom the 'imaginary homelands' (Rushdie) gives birth to the longing for India—the India of their imagination that is still the same that it was when they had left it—more of fantasy than a reality. As a result, they are more Indian than Indians in India are.

The identity of a diasporic writer is an ever-evolving. The dominant motif of anxiety in their literary works emerges from a conflict between the native and host country's culture. In the diaspora, the nation of origin personifies itself as a traditional identity and implicates the

individual in an ostensibly natural relationship with 'Indianness', a fossilized national identity become a substitute for lived relations. Lahiri writes, "The traditions on either side of the hyphen dwell in me like siblings, still occasionally sparring, one outshining the other depending on the day. But like siblings they are intimately familiar with one another, forgiving and intertwined." ("Reading") These writers underscore the opaque nature of national boundaries. These boundaries become aggressive, all important in the diaspora, as a way of defining identity, thresholds mark the contours of one's experience, a platform for resisting co-option by the hegemonic discourse.

"Life for women in diaspora can be doubly painful --struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies." (Clifford, "Diasporas" 314)

As a retort to constant contact with hegemonic cultures and becoming disillusioned by racial discrimination and in an endeavor to conserve their identities, Indians have constructed phantom Indian identity. In an effort of resisting the immersion in the alien community, they have created 'cultural island' and expanded their own idiosyncratic cultural practices, which both defend and often extend/enlarge their original cultures. Creolized editions of their own practices come into vogue. But it is the women who are lumbered with the load of maintaining this cultural purity. They are obliged to safeguard the icon of a coherent community faithful to its familial, ancestral customs and traditions. The Indian women are encumbered with the responsibility of maintaining this Indian home in the diaspora by remaining true to their Indian mores and codes of conduct. This in turn means glorifying patriarchal idea of womanhood and becoming even more traditionalist and conservative than one's Indian counterpart. As a result, more rigid patriarchic system is implemented by the diasporic community.

The literature written by diasporic women writers is basically a presentation of the diasporic women and their predicament. These writers display the features of the community more accurately and vehemently than any other writers do. The diasporic literature, howsoever optimistic the projection is, still echoes the exploration of dislocation, disarticulation, rootlessness, isolation and estrangement.

For the present study the text under consideration are Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Mrs. Sen's", and a chapter, chapter 20, of Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*. The particular choice of one section from, *Jasmine*, the saga of moral fortitude seeking self-discovery, is done based on the semblance of the theme under consideration. They scrutinize and illumine certain shared themes and patterns like the nostalgia for home that subsists only in recollection, condition of disarticulation, segregation and most important the response of various female characters to the altered conditions.

Whereas Mrs. Sen's is a short story, the extract from *Jasmine* is a part of novel i.e. the Flushing episode of Jasmine's life introduced as a flashback. The marked use of flashback reproduced either in through words or in thoughts, serves the purpose of unfolding the theme and evoking the feeling of crippling loss of a relatively coherent earlier identity. It serves the purpose of reminding Mrs. Sen of her days in Calcutta. The whole selected Flushing episode of *Jasmine* is a memory trip for Jasmine living a totally different Americanized life now. The analepsis serves the purpose of presenting a contrastive situation and highlights the pathos of present setup.

"MRS. SEN'S"

Mrs. Sen, a character in the short story "Mrs. Sen's" (*Interpreter of Maladies*), is wedged on the verge of two distinctly different cultures, afraid to cross over and unable to go back. She is a perfect insignia of many Indian women stranded on cultural isthmus on foreign shores. Contrary to Jasmine, who decides to break free from the Pseudo-Indian atmosphere and plunge into this alien culture, unafraid of consequence, Mrs. Sen remains struck in the verge.

Mrs. Sen migrated to America after getting married to Mr. Sen, who is a professor in University, but she longs for her nature i.e. India in her case. The longing is expressed through the use of the word home to refer to Calcutta. "When Mrs. Sen said home she meant India." (Lahiri 116) Her own identity is lost in transition. She is not mentioned even once by her name. She is always referred to as "Professor's wife" (Lahiri 111). It is worth noticing that the first and last sentences that she occurs are same, "Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at university" (Lahiri 112 and 134) as if Mr. Sen is the axis of her existence. Though most of the story is oriented towards elaborate

description of Mrs. Sen's rituals and routines but the onus of all the decisions goes to Mr. Sen. The feeling of the loss of the supportive community is a dominant emotion in her.

Her culinary ritual is reminiscent of India and she indulges enthusiastically and proficiently in it. She peeled, scrubbed, rinsed, dried but could not drive. Her home is a cultural island where everything is the way it was in India when they left it. She wants to cling on to Indian rituals and traditions even if it causes a lot of wastage of time and effort. Her chopping ritual is emblematic of her longing to create home away from home. She seems to be concerned only with cooking and nothing more. Her culinary details emerge in sharp contrast to Eliot's mother who never bothers to cook. Her alienation and dislocation is highlighted by telling the story from the perspective of eleven year old American boy, Eliot. Mrs. Sen is addressed as a third person. Eliot is the '*sutradhar*' of her story.

Mrs. Sen lived in a university apartment furnished and maintained in an Indian style. The detailed picture of the life style, presented from the perspective of Eliot for whom every article is a curio, brings out their Indianness, Especially their routine of taking off shoes outside their house and covering everything. "The lampshade covered in manufacturer's plastic...the T.V. and telephone covered by pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges"(Lahiri 112) and "a sofa draped at all times with a green and black bedcover printed with rows of elephants bearing palanquins at their back" (Lahiri 115) all denote their minds draped and closed to outside foreign influences. Her outburst at not wearing certain saris indicates the frustration at the vacuum in her life. Her Indian English contributes towards creating Indian atmosphere. Language peppered with Indian words like 'halvah, pakoras', and Indian habit of using continuous instead of indefinite tense "*I was without knowing that one day I would be so far.*" (Lahiri 123) heightens the mood.

Mrs. Sen addresses her husband as Mr. Sen never taking his first name and wearing vermilion on her forehead as a mark of her married status and to ensure his long life as the cultural superstitions suggest. She also shows her undaunted dedication for her husband with the use of the modal 'must'. "I must wear this powder (vermilion) everyday." (Lahiri, 117)

Mrs. Sen's inability to drive is responsible and symbolic of her non-absorption in host culture. She feels her dislocation will lessen if she learns to drive but the rhetoric "will things improve?"(Lahiri, 119) puts a question mark on her state. Her attempts at learning to drive symbolize her attempts to immerse in American culture. However, she hates to drive. Her outbursts like "I hate driving. I won't go on." (Lahiri 131) The faltering of her English represent her broken spirits "Everyone, this people, too much in this world."(Lahiri, 121) Her yearning for fresh fish, the quintessential part of Bengali cuisine, metaphorically stands for her yearning for her motherland and supportive community. Her craving for fish thwarted by her inability to drive implies her love for motherland intimidated by the influences of the host country.

JASMINE

The Flushing Episode of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction *Jasmine* throws light on the position of Indian women in diaspora. Right in the beginning of the episode there is a metaphorical reference to Flushing as a "cocoon" implying the safety as well as seclusion from the rest of the world. Whereas characters like Nirmala are content to stay safe inside, Jasmine decides to venture out and savor the world

Nirmala does not have any identity of her own. Apart from her passion for Indian movie videos, she does not play any important role. Nirmala's passion of Hindi films implying her craving for 'home' dominates the tenor of the chapter. Hindi movie cassettes are a device for making the readers' empathize with her feeling of alienation. She does not even have any idea about her husband's profession. Professor Vadhera's supreme position in the household is known from the fact that no one in the family, not even his wife, knows about his profession and neither does she feels authorized to know. He is the first person of the family introduced to the readers. As many as nine paragraphs start with Professorji as their first word the very addition of the term of respect 'ji' to his name show his dominance in the household and in Jasmine's life. He regulates everybody's life.

The wreck that foreign soil has cast over him is manifested in the distortion of his name. A full paragraph is devoted to the Americanization of Devinder Vadhera's name to Dave Vadhera and in turn to David O'Hara. In spite of his high qualification, he is forced to lead a dual life. Instead

of being a professor in a university, as he claims, he is working as an importer and sorter of human (Indian) hair. The irony of the situation becomes more pungent, when he tries to justify his profession by giving it a scientific perspective.

Nirmala like a typical Indian wife uses a pronoun 'he' rather than his name, the idea reinforced by affixing 'The Almighty Him' giving him the status equivalent to God. "He was following an ancient prescription for marital accord: silence, order, and authority. So was she: submission, beauty, innocence."(Mukherjee, 151) He is not called by his name even by Jasmine. She calls him 'Professorji' out of respect.

Their cultural islands consist of "apartment of artificially maintained Indianness" (Mukherjee, 145) there are references to "enjoying good things of America" (Mukherjee, 147) but they include "friends from our village, plentiful food, VCRs (to watch Indian movies) and air conditioning" (Mukherjee, 148). The rest of America does not exist for them. This helps in creating nostalgic ambiance throughout.

Jasmine is projected in the role of a typical widow. Dominance of Nirmala over Jasmine by the virtue of being married is evident from the fact that Jasmine wears plain saris and salwar-kameez outfits with patterns for much older women bought by Nirmala, even when she prefers to wear T-shirt and cords. She was supposed to "show a proper modesty of appearance and attitude."(Mukherjee 145) she does not participate in discussions regarding marriage. The idea is reinforced with the word 'of course'. "Of course as a widow I did not participate" (Mukherjee 147). She "cooked, shopped cleaned, tended the old folks and made conversation with Professorji when he got home." (Mukherjee 148) Several references to Jasmine as a widow and her expectant behaviour show that they do not want to slough their Indian cultural grab. This type of atmosphere suffocates Jasmine. She feels she is "a prisoner doing unreal time" (Mukherjee 148) and one morning suddenly she walks out of that ghetto.

Whereas Jasmine goes through several transformations in America- from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase to Jane -she dons each new avatar equally efficiently, Mrs. Sen is unable to transmute. Jasmine lives a fluid state of identity but Mrs. Sen is set up in a fossilized identity in the new and alien

culture as an immigrant. Both the characters are set in same type of circumstances but their response to it decides their future.

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