

# From Escape to Acceptance: A Tale of ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ Cultural Assimilation

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## Abstract

"Interpreter of Maladies" by Jhumpa Lahiri is a charming collection of superbly crafted short stories. First book by author concentrates on postcolonial diasporic challenges affecting Indians and Indian-Americans who are trapped between the forcibly abandoned Indian roots and the completely new western society they must accept in order to live. They thus have erratic lives. It is necessary for the diaspora to maintain the balance between these two very different cultures. Because of the portrayal of female subalterns in the new social milieu and the postcolonial cultural identity question, the book is intriguing to read. Notable is how the female protagonists struggle to adopt the new cultural identity and get approval for it from both the culturally superior validator and the male validator. The female characters work hard to convey their subaltern viewpoint, despite their struggles with the painful anxiety of either success or failure as they create their new identities in the new situation. The women characters in Lahiri's works typically take the biggest hits when there is a diasporic shift in setting. Mrs. Sen, the titular character is one such example. Jhumpa Lahiri has adroitly illustrated how difficult it is for women like Mrs. Sen to establish their presence and identities both in a foreign country and in their own homes, positioned against their husbands. The women characters in these diasporic settings suffer because their roots have been abandoned in favour of a new, captivating world, not by choice, which makes them even more sentimental about their beloved past and their own country. Mrs. Sen resisted the cultural assimilation and tried to safeguard her Indian identity only soon to realise that the static cultural stance will impede the survival in the new surroundings, with minimal support from her spouse. Although she heroically confronts the difficulties of her new life, she is painfully hollow within as she attempts to explain and defend her pointless lifestyle. Her realization helps her forge her new cultural identity, that is the state of 'hybridity' or 'multiculturalism'.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Cultural Assimilation, Escapism, Acceptance, Hybridity, Trauma, Identity, Alienation

People move away from their home countries in search of better economic opportunities, which causes cultural and traditional displacement and makes them vulnerable to issues such as identity crisis, language discomfort, racial discrimination, alienation, and cultural balkanization, all of which are common terms in diasporic literature. The identity crises, sense of uprootedness, emotional imbalances that ensue, and traumas that immigrants endure all around the world are explored primarily in Diasporic Literature.

Originally, the term "Diaspora" was used to describe the dispersal or departure of Jews from Palestine, which is literally translated as "dispersion" in Greek and "exile" in Hebrew. However, the word "diaspora" later evolved to refer to populations that have scattered from the "center"—their original homelands—to the "periphery" or "margin"—the foreign territories. This can happen either forcibly, or voluntarily. Ironically, things turn around when the dispersed population finds itself in a marginalised position in a foreign country and the newly discovered country suddenly assumes the role of the dominant centre, pushing these "expatriates" even further to the periphery.

Life in exile, whether it be forced or by choice, sometimes causes serious identity uncertainty, which is what life in the diaspora entails. It is compulsive to glance back at one's origin or root when one advances from the perimeter (formerly one's original homeland) to the core (the adopted region). In Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, the female characters are profoundly wound up by feelings of estrangement and emotional turmoil when placed upon the foreign soil. Jhumpa Lahiri is yet another well-known novelist from the diaspora, joining the ranks of Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, and a host of such others. Jhumpa experiences a neurotic, deep love for the culture of her own country, and alienation from it, much like all these writers and other members of the diaspora.

Jhumpa Lahiri's "Interpreter of Maladies" is a lovely collection of skillfully written short stories. The author's first book focuses on the postcolonial diasporic issues that affect Indians and Indian-Americans who are caught between the forcibly abandoned Indian traditions and the entirely new western culture they must embrace in order to survive. As a result, they live an unstable existence. The diaspora is compelled to preserve the harmony between these two cultures, which are quite unlike. The book is a fascinating read because of the postcolonial cultural identity issue and the treatment of female subalterns in the new social environment. It is interesting to see how the female characters strive to fit into the new cultural identity and to get approval for it from both their culturally superior validators, the local Americans, and their directly superior male counterparts. The female protagonists put forth effort to express their subaltern attitude even as they struggle with the traumatic anxiety of potential success or failure in the process, as they forge their new identities.

This paper seeks to analyse a short tale 'Mrs. Sen's' that was included in the 1999 book "Interpreter of Maladies," which won Jhumpa Lahiri the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Her debut book, 'Interpreter of Maladies', consists of nine short stories. These nine stories offer a colourful platter of varied delicacies, each carrying a different aroma and taste but equally delectable to the tastebuds. All of these narratives depict individuals who have been uprooted from their beloved country and placed in unfamiliar environments, raising issues of identity and belonging. In actuality, these characters are the author's own prototypes, expressing her own multiple identities.

The current research tries to investigate the diasporic existence of Mrs. Sen who is unable to sever her umbilical cord with her motherland, like many of her generic types, and oscillates between twin identity pull, combined with pangs of cultural disassociation and identity loss culminating in the tug of home, far back in India.

The sixth tale of Interpreter of Maladies narrates the tale of Mrs. Sen. The eponymous protagonist of the narrative, Mrs. Sen, is a young Bengali wife who moves with her husband to an eastern coastal city and

finds herself cut off from her familiar sociocultural environment. Mrs. Sen is wed to a professor who is passionate about his work. He appears to only return home for supper or rare trips because he appears to spend the majority of his days at the institution. She looks after Eliot, an 11-year-old, after school. She doesn't need to work, but doing so helps her fill the lonesome afternoons her husband spends working away from home. Eliot, who also plays the role of Mrs. Sen's confidante, is the story's narrator. A warm and loving bond is established soon between the lonely American boy and his equally lonely caretaker Mrs. Sen. Eliot soon finds out that Mrs. Sen is profoundly homesick for her family, friends, neighbourhood and everything else that is uniquely Indian and Bengali and not present in America.

Her nostalgia, her longing for homeland is spoken loud by such statements,

“Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?” (119)

“Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?” (116) and Eliot telling her that they might call her, “but they might complain that you were making too much noise,” (117) contrarily.

Mrs. Sen is unmistakably suffering from cultural alienation and a sense of disconnection. She endures her sorrow in silence until ultimately speaking out gradually about it. Young Eliot, who patiently and constantly listens to her lyrical tales from India, becomes her amigo.

Her character may be thoroughly examined to show that she is having difficulty adjusting to the new American cultural environment. She is forced to deal with the culture of the ‘Other’ because she is positioned in a liminal area, and as a result, she is in the process of negotiating a new identity. However, as a new and forced immigrant to the United States, Mrs. Sen has made the very first adjustments, but she, like many other first-generation immigrants, is still too preoccupied with her own cultural heritage and national beliefs to fully assimilate. She prefers to decorate her American apartment as the one in India. She tries to create a replica of India in her American home right from her appearance, the arrangement of furniture, shoe rack at the entrance, the Indian hospitality, Bengali cuisine, and everything that could make her feel at home.

"White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic. The TV and the telephone were covered by pieces of yellow fabric with scalloped edges." (112)

She merely makes an unconscious effort to seek solace in the past and to find as many ways as she can to avoid the present, the scary new found land, which she sees as a danger to her ethnic identity. She surrounds herself and even others like Eliot by repeatedly recounting the events of her life and relationships "at home":

"At home, you know, we have a driver" or the admission that "Everything is there" (113). By anecdotes of her former life, she makes herself feel at home in the security of such stories.

““At home that is all you have to do. Not everybody has a telephone. But raise your voice a bit, or express grief or joy of any kind’... By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables.” (116)

Tragically, Mr. Sen, the husband, does not help Mrs. Sen, who painfully embodies the culturally and emotionally starved diasporic beings, rebuild her broken self. Mrs. Sen is an example of those who undergo self-imposed exile from their home countries in order to travel with their husbands to foreign countries. She heaves a sigh and utters sadly:

"Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence." (115)

Her regular activities are similarly planned around the idea of escape. While she prefers to put off her driving habits, which are plainly necessary in her new life, she steadfastly maintains her daily Indian cooking rituals and cooks ferociously even though there are now just her and her husband left to consume all of this cuisine. It appears as though she is using her cooking method and her desire to purchase and consume fish—both of which are associated with her conception of her homeland—as a way to promote her ethnic identity and to protect her from cultural otherness. Despite being helpful in facilitating the process of transition and laying the foundation for the development of her future hybrid, Mrs. Sen's commitment to her identity is also impeding the process of 'cultural assimilation'. No wonder her broken English and Indian accent is a sign of her early acceptance of the 'Other' culture when she asks Eliot,

"'Is it Beethoven?' she once asked, pronouncing the first part of the composer's name not 'bay,' but 'bee,' like the insect." (120)

However, there are still many aspects of her life, such as sticking to the colourful collection of her now out-of-place saris from her homeland, that remain in the way of transition and acceptance. She gets frustrated and flings open the drawers of the bureau and doors of the closet revealing 'saris of every imaginable texture and shade' complaining,

"When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this? ... 'Send pictures' they write. 'Send pictures of your new life.' What pictures can I send?' ... 'they think I live the life a queen, Eliot.'" She continues further, "they think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace." (125)

While his wife is dealing with the mental anguish and suffering inside the boundaries of the so-called home, Mr. Sen is seldom to be found around the house since he is busy in his collegial life, giving classes on the college campus and striving to ensure his future and tenure in America. She is under pressure from him to learn how to drive so she can go out and do marketing on her own without bothering him. His wife is having a difficult time adjusting to her new circumstances, but he is a detached and emotionless man who expects her to magically fit into the alien way of life. Dubey analyses her adamant stance about driving and reflects that her "stubborn refusal to learn [to drive] can be seen as a subconscious ... resistance to the dictated terms of this new world" (24)

But in order to be autonomous from an ostensibly busy patriarchal society, she finally musters the courage and confidence to drive. Though the first toddler's steps result in a nightmare, but play a significant role in demolishing the mental barrier of nonacceptance. Her perennial escapism finally gives way and she initiates herself from the state of denial to the acceptance of foreign culture. It might be viewed as a revolutionary gesture on the part of Mrs. Sen, to drive to buy fish as her spouse is not always there to assist. Mrs. Sen has discovered that in order to live in her new environment, she must

learn to open up to the culture of the Other, symbolised metaphorically by the automobile, which she first perceives with tremendous horror—a fear strongly linked to the meeting between the ‘Self’ and the culture of the ‘Other’. Her initial attempt to cross the boundaries fails, but no matter how traumatic the experience is, it at least forces her to confront the trauma and may help her break the cycle of escape and avoidance by making her more receptive to the realm of the Other, which will undoubtedly be helpful in creating and negotiating her new boundaries and in inspiring her to embrace her new life in America.

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