

INTERPRETING THE CULTURAL GHETTO IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "MRS. SEN'S"

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Abstract

One of the main concerns of Diaspora literature is the saga of migration from one's own country to another country in the hope of better prospects. Migration is not just about shifting from one place to another. It is a complex phenomenon which involves travelling across cultures. The term 'Culture' is an amalgamation of many socio-cultural artifacts such as religion, shared rituals, myths, language, clothes, cuisine, ethnicity etc. It involves a kind of a heritage and a feeling of being together in a particular community. As a result, the term is complex, multilayered and fluid. The present research article focusses on woman immigrants because they carry the 'cultural baggage' of their own native land and find it difficult to part with it in the foreign country. This gives rise to a kind of a cultural dilemma for these characters. The article attempts to focus on the cultural ghetto, physical and mental, created by the protagonist of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story 'Mrs.Sen's' from her Pulitzer Prize winning collection of short stories Interpreter of Maladies (2000). The article intends to prove that the unwilling immigrant women try desperately to hang on to their native culture through different means. In a desperate bid they create a cultural ghetto in their small space and try to deliberately put in everything that would remind them of their native land.

Key-words: Culture, ghetto, migration, identities, imaginary homeland and assimilation

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As immigrants fly across oceans they shed their old clothing, because clothes maketh the man, and new ones help ease the transition. Men's clothing has less international variation; the change is not so drastic. But those women who are not used to wearing western clothes find themselves in a dilemma. If they focus on integration, conversion, and conformity they have to sacrifice habit, style and self-perception. The choice is hard. (Kapur 152)

The above quote by novelist Manju Kapur aptly captures the immigrant woman's pain and dilemma of shifting from one's own country/ place to another. Migration and Culture have been the major concerns of aspects Diaspora writings. Migration brings with it a complete socio-cultural upheaval for women. Women, especially Indian women, inherently carry with them the cultural baggage of their native land. For men it's not that hard to adopt to the changes as the cultural code of conduct for men is almost same in every corner of the world. However, women face all kinds of difficulties when confronted with a new culture, especially a culture which is completely different from their own native culture. Some women seem to accept, and even adopt, the new country and its culture. But the majority of the migrant seem to be unwilling to accept the new land and its cultural codes. These 'unwilling' women find it difficult to adjust to the differences in the cultures. They find their old habits and way of life coming in the way of their integration. In fact, they make every effort to hang on to their native culture. For this, they even go to the extent of creating their own cultural ghettos.

The unwilling immigrant women suffer on account of their own internal conflict – having to choose between the new and their native culture. It is easy to deal with the external socio-cultural challenges but difficult to contain the inner craving for the old world. Their unwillingness to adopt and adjust in a new culture brings trauma to them in a new land. It is more painful for those women who make concerted attempts to cling to their traditional culture. They hardly try to meet the demands of the new place and its culture. This results in the immigrant's failure in assimilating in the new land. In an attempt to retain their culture, such immigrants take refuge in cultural ghettos of their own creation; rejecting all opportunities to melt in their new land of settlement.

Jhumpa Lahiri, herself being an immigrant has accurately portrayed how the immigrants, especially the first generation women immigrants, cling desperately to the old world and fail in

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assimilating into the new culture. ‘Mrs. Sen’s’, a short story from her Pulitzer Prize winning book *Interpreter of Maladies* (2000) authentically captures the desperate efforts of Mrs. Sen towards hanging on to ‘her culture’ which ultimately leads to her failure in the new land.

The change of place not only brings a change in geographical environment but it affects / influences immigrants’ lives in more than one ways. It almost demands a complete ‘psychological transformation’ which many immigrants find it difficult to cope up with. The immigration, though intended for the better opportunities, leads to the dilemma of identities, displacement, feeling of rootlessness, isolation and creates a socio-cultural dilemma. Some of them willingly try to overcome the barriers and but others remain or create their own cultural ghettos to seek recluse at least at their psychological level.

The protagonist of the story - Mrs. Sen- is simply introduced to us as the wife of Prof. Sen. She follows her husband unwillingly to America. Mr. Sen is a Professor of Mathematics at the University. A typical expatriate, Mrs. Sen continues with her Indian way of life even in America. She retains her Indian attire, “a shimmering white sari pattered with orange paisleys” (112), and puts vermilion on her forehead. For her “home meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables” (116). She makes all attempts to maintain an Indian feel in her day to day activities. There is also a typical Indian ambience at home. The sofa is “draped at all times with a green and black bedcover printed with rows of elephants bearing palanquins on their backs” (115). She does not cut or chop the vegetables with a knife like the Americans. She cuts it using the traditional Indian blade that she has brought with her from India. Mrs. Sen sits on newspapers in the living room floor to use the blade:

...she chopped things, seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas. The blade was hinged at one end to a narrow wooden base. The steel, more black than silver, lacked a uniform polish, and had a serrated crest...Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. (114)

She conducts the entire process like any woman would traditionally do it in India. She enjoys the process and goes about it in a leisurely manner as it gives her a feel of her something very Indian:

Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash. She split things in half, then quarters, speedily producing florets, cubes, slices, and shreds. She could peel a potato in seconds. At times she sat cross-legged, at times with legs splayed, surrounded by an array of colanders and shallow bowls of water in which she immersed her chopped ingredients. (114)

She yearns for almost everything that is Indian. She repetitively plays the Bengali audio cassettes that she has brought from India. Mrs. Sen desperately waits for a letter from India. She would check her mailbox daily to see if there was a letter for her from India: "It was her custom to check the mailbox after driving practice" (121).

Mrs. Sen's unwillingness to go out and mix with the populace brings her loneliness and hence she seeks a job of babysitting to spend her time and fight the pain of being alone at home. She couldn't drive so she. Since driving, in a way, is a basic necessity in America, her incapability of driving brings her shock and humiliation. Lahiri depicts how Mrs. Sen tries to seek reclusiveness in her old world memories instead of competing with the new world. A eleven year boy's mother comes for an enquiry for babysitting but finds it surprising that Mrs. Sen can't drive. To hide her humiliation, Mrs. Sen says to the boy's mother, "Yes I am learning... At home, you know, we have a driver" (113). Mrs. Sen suffers in almost all walks of life. For example- food, clothes, language and living style etc.

Old world memories seem to be more real to her than the present. Mrs. Sen narrates many incidents from India to Eliot. She explains enthusiastically about everything in India. Mrs. Sen complains about the silence during nights in America. She tells Eliot, "Here in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (115). Again she becomes nostalgic thinking about the time she spent in groups. The social bonding in India is a primary condition that reminds and increases Mrs. Sen's sense of loneliness. The sharp contrast between the Indian sense of community and the American individualism, makes her crave for the lost home, as for her "Everything is there [in India]" (112).

Mrs. Sen's adherence to the memories of her native land and makes it difficult for her to assimilate in America. She feels lonely. She misses the neighbourhood and community culture of India. She sighs about the loneliness and expresses it to Eliot. The pain of being alone is so severe that one day she asks him: "Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (116). She tells him that back in India, "... 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 neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements" (116). Her desperate and intense desire to go back to India can be felt when 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?" (119). Mrs. Sen feels "ashamed" of her yearning for her own mother and family when she compares herself to Eliot. She finds Eliot wiser in this: "You are wiser than that, Eliot. You already taste the way things must be" (123).

The unwillingness to shed off native identity and culture brings to her a painful feeling of being 'dislocated'. She faces embarrassments on account of language as well. She speaks English but not very fluently. She speaks with her 'indianisms'. For example, she tells Eliot's mother proudly that they have "driver" at home [India]. But Eliot's mother mischievously smiles

and asks her whether she means a “chauffeur?” (113). She looks at Mr. Sen for its meaning, Mr. Sen nods and hence she also nods to Eliot’s mother. Another incident where she faces embarrassment on account of on account of language is when goes to buy fish from the market with Eliot. On her way back, the bus the driver looks suspiciously at her blood-line bag, asking her what it contains and whether she knows English. It brings her the pain of humiliation.

Mrs. Sen’s attempts to learn driving is in a way symbolic of her reluctance/failure to adopt the new cultures. Mr. Sen tries his best to instill confidence in Mrs. Sen and wants her to drive on the main roads. But she always postpones it for ‘another day’. One day, on her own, she drives with Eliot to the market place and meets with an accident. Fortunately, both Eliot and Mrs. Sen escape without any major injuries.

This accident is a big setback for her. It is the end of her attempts to learn driving. It marks the end of her attempts to be independent, to be off her own. Thereafter, Mrs. Sen takes reclude in her cocoon- the cultural ghetto that she has created in her apartment. This cultural ghetto is of her own making. She never comes out of it. Like most Indian women who go abroad, she makes every attempt keep the Indian ambience around her. Every small thing symbolizing the native culture becomes important to her.

According to William Safran, members of a diaspora retained a collective memory of ‘their original homeland’; they idealized their ‘ancestral home’, were committed to the restoration of ‘the original homeland’ and continued in various ways to ‘relate to that homeland’ (qtd in Cohen 4). It would only be pertinent to say, to borrow the phrase from Safran, that Mrs Sen ‘continued to relate to her homeland’ all the time.

To sum up, Mrs. Sen every now and then seeks reclude in her old world instead of trying to cope up with the new culture. As a result of this, she is not able to adopt the new land and its culture. She continuously remains in nostalgia. She lives in a mental and psychological cultural ghetto. She deliberately avoids learning the American cultural values and customs. She refuses to integrate with the adopted land. Mrs. Sen remains an alien, forever on the periphery.

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