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Cultural Barriers of Immigrants in the Select Short Stories of Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

The study of diaspora examines the physical and mental pangs of immigrants in the alien land. At this contemporary world the wave of migration heralded a new interpretation of human psychic issues. This offspring emanates towards the people of eastern countries who are propelled towards western countries. In the exile land their life becomes a challenge. They face various problems and these troubles push them to curtailment. Among these immigrants, many writers too lead their life in the new land. Their writings present a voice to this suppressed society. Their works picture the real traumas of the new land settlers. The current paper intends to discuss about the diasporic issues found in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories 'Mrs.Sen' and 'Unaccustomed Earth'. Jhumpa Lahiri is one among the immigrant writers who shares the problems of Diaspora in a vivid manner. Her writings visualized the endurance of migrants. The selected short stories reflect the struggle of Indian immigrant in the alien land.

KeyWords: Diaspora, Migration, Curtailment, Suppression, Endurance, Terrain, Identities, Acculturation, Alienation



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Jhumpa Lahiri was born in London to the Bengali parents. She visited India with her parents and got probabilities to texture the real India. Her family travelled to Boston from London and then to Rhode Island. Her real-life exile gives the acquaintance of sharing the diasporic complications. Her works are loaded with diasporic concerns. 'Mrs Sen' is a short story from Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* which was published in 1999. The story collection focuses upon marital relationship, the belief upon Indian marriages and Indian family setup. The story characters are either Indian or Indian Americans. These characters caught between two cultures and struggle to find their identity. The Western people consider themselves as civilized, matured and ethical. This conception is spread all over the world. It invites many to lead their life in western countries which results in diasporic issues. Diaspora is defined by Hae-Kyung Um in 'Diasporas and Interculturalism'. She states that:

The term 'diaspora', drawn from the ancient Greek words *dia* (through) and *speirein* (to scatter or sow), refers to a dispersion or spreading of people belonging to one nation or having a common culture. The original and restrictive usage of the term Diaspora, with a capital 'D', is typically applied to the dispersion of Jews after the Babylonian and Roman conquests of Palestine and the dispersion of Greeks and Armenians. (2)

Diaspora leads people in cross-cultural adaptation but their longing for homeland never decreases. The thought native land adheres strongly in immigrant mind. Uma Parameswaran, an Indian Canadian writer quotes this demeanor as, "People who move away from their native countries occupy a liminality, an uneasy pull between two cultures... disowned by both heaven and earth, and as a face-saving device, was given his own constellation" (316).

Diasporic experiences partake the impediments of second breed immigrants. The new land settlers attempt to accommodate themselves in the exotic surface. Often, they battle to find their distinctiveness; they find a vacuum in their life. In this way Jhumpa Lahiri's short



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stories 'Mrs Sen' and 'Unaccustomed Earth' deliberate the painful memories of outlandish people. The protagonist Mrs Sen in the short story 'Mrs Sen' is filled with Indian cultural practices. Marriage impels her to America, the unusual land. She struggles to face with two different cultures. She finds none to share her longings in the new land. Many immigrants create multicultural sensibilities; they ignore their ancient traditions and try to follow the new land culture. This balance ensues in cultural clash. The life of Sen in India gives a kind of fulfillment to her whereas melancholy in America. She compares each and everything in America with India. She finds alienation and aloofness with everything. She fails to accommodate with the surface.

Mrs Sen acts as a care taker to an American boy called Eliot. In that alien country she has more companions. She shares her personal longings to that eight-year-old young boy. Eliot finds fascinating on her narrations; it seems to be exotic to him. She wears Indian costumes in America. She prefers saree and keeps saffron on her forehead. Eliot enjoys her method of cooking and chopping vegetables. The author describes as,

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)

Eliot admires every activity of her. Often, she sends Eliot to fetch something in her kitchen. She narrates the story of the blade which she brings from India. "Whenever there is a wedding in the family... 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" (115). Though she lives in American modern house, she prefers traditional cooking. Through this she maintains her identity in cooking. She keeps up hospitality



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with Eliot's mother. At evenings she comes to pick up Eliot, Mrs Sen asks her to sit on the sofa and provide something to eat. When she receives letters from home, she reads it as many times possible. She reads word by word. It shows her love and longing towards her family members. The author narrates as, "... studies the front and back. She unfolded it and reread to herself, sighing every now and then" (122).

Mrs Sen says that at her home many people are there to console her at troubles. She aches as, "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" (116). Eliot can understand that home for Sen is home in India not the apartment locates in America. The sensation of displacement leads her homelessness. This feeling of homelessness is not only of physical but also selfhood. Her narration with Eliot states that she misses the real taste of fish in America. She utters, "She had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky" (123).

Mrs Sen attempts to get driving license, she hopes that everything will become normal when she gets license. But her effort fails. The following lines narrate the difficulties of her driving,

She stopped the car without warning to listen to something on the radio... if she saw a bird twenty feet in front of her, she beeped the horn with the index finger and waited for it to fly away. In India, she said, the driver sat on the right side, not the left.... "Impossible, Eliot. How can I go there?" "You need to wait until no one's coming." (120)

This attempt symbolizes her failings in adaptation of other land practices. Even she cannot wear American way of dressing. Many people gaze her saree in a different way. Her attempts of imitating Americans end with tragedy. She never mingles with them. At the same time, she



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cannot easily come out from her traditional beliefs. Chinese book I Ching or Book of Changes states human situations as:

There are three predominant themes running through the I Ching. The first theme concerns the Tao, the universal law of change. Change is viewed as the transformation of one force. (e.g., firm) into another (e.g., yielding), and the cycle of complexes of phenomena (e.g., day and night). The second theme is that of image. Image is an idea in the unseen world; thus, what happens in the visible world is only a reproduction of what happens in the world that cannot be perceived. The third theme is judgment. Judgment allows the possibility for making a decision about a course of action, as found in the image. This course of action may or may not be harmful, as the I Ching can indicate” (10).

Mrs Sen in the short story ‘Mrs.Sen’ articulates the first-generation immigrant’s internal battle whereas Lahiri’s short story ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ proclaims the personal conflicts of second-generation settlers. In the views of A. Srinivas, the experience of the first- and second-generation immigrants is a ‘complex mix of experience’. In the story ‘Unaccustomed Earth’ the protagonist Ruma is the second-generation immigrant. As she lives in abroad, she marries a white man, Adam and gets a bi-racial child Akash. Ruma’s parents are unwilling to accept the marriage of their daughter. As the first-generation immigrants their mind is completely filled with Indian cultural set up. Ruma combats with her personal aspirations and amenabilities. After the death of her mother, her father is left alone in the exotic land. She desires to persuade her father to stay with her family. Ruma’s father declines her wish and started a fresh life with Mrs. Begchi



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Rumaprefers to follow her ancestral practices. She always thinks and cares about the life of her father and sister. She dreams of her sister's life who settles in India. Ruma's mother was very strict in following their native language. Ruma always speaks in Bengali with her mother. The lines narrate, "Her mother had been strict, so much so that Ruma had never spoken to her in English" (12). She is caught between two cultures, the ancestral culture which is taught by her mother and American culture which she gets over by observation and practice. She uses two languages, sometimes English and sometimes Bengali. She searches her identity and cannot find it in traditional land or in the alien country. Her son Akash, the third generation is comfortable with the strange culture. He easily transfers with the new one.

Ruma in her father's presence cook food and tries to eat with her fingers,

... the vegetables sliced too thickly, the rice overdone, but as her father worked his way through the things she'd made, he repeatedly told her how delicious it was.

She ate with her fingers, as her father did, for the first time in months, for the first time in this new house in Seattle. (21)

Such actions of her father create the interest of her traditional culture. The present article attempts to map the diasporic issues. Ruma's father insists her to bring up Akash with Bengali roots. He should not grow up like an American child. Akash follows American way of living and aware about Bengali heritage. He tries to speak in Bengali with his grandfather. Even though Ruma marries an American man, she is unwilling to loss her cultural identities, she wishes to maintain and Passover it to next generation. Thus, the roots and identity of their culture is protected.

The dislocation of people pushes towards hybridity which is termed as transmigration. Assimilating a new nation gives the feeling of homelessness and alienation. Globalization stresses multiculturalism. Immigrants either feels home everywhere or exotic in all lands. The



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nature of understanding about borders gives a fulfilled liveliness life with. Makarand Paranjape quotes,

Over the last twenty years or so, it seems as if the Indian diaspora has suddenly of age. Shedding its minority status, it has demonstrated its inclination for come becoming a majority, not in the sense of numerical superiority, but of growing up, maturing, attaining self- apprehension and self- expression... Now, it actually seems as if this diaspora has an unprecedented ascendancy and leverage both in the host country and the homeland. Perhaps its days of “impossible mourning,” to use Vijay Mishra’s phrase, might at last be at an end...” (2001 v).

Mrs Sen finds no identity in America but when she comes back to India, she can get it back. Her mind is crammed with past experience of India. She always dreams of her returning back to India and get everything she lost in her life. This story clearly pictures of an Indian women’s struggle in the foreign land. Ruma gets comfort of feeding her traditions to her son. This study attempts to explain how the first- and second-generation people carved their life in the alien land. Further it explains how they establish socio- cultural practices. The paper gives meaning to acculturation, alienation and assimilation. A new perspective is given to diasporic literature through the story ‘Unaccustomed Earth’. Lahiri has created a new community which gives relief to all people all over the world. She does not mean the loss of one’s identity instead she narrates the transnational development and changes occur between individuals. The change creates a link to immigrant with his home land.

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