

## EMOTIONAL EXILE: A STUDY OF PERSONAL ISOLATION AND A SENSE OF LONELINESS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "MRS SEN'S"

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### Abstract

The paper entitled "Emotional Exile: a Study of Personal Isolation and a Sense of Loneliness in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's"" focuses on the deep sense of loneliness and emotional exile experienced by the Indian immigrants settled in the United States. An attempt has been made to explore how cultural isolation results in personal isolation by discussing substantially about their inabilities to reconcile American culture with their Indian culture as represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's."

**Key words:** Diaspora, displacement, cultural conflicts, identity crises, alienation

The paper entitled "Emotional Exile: a Study of Personal Isolation and a Sense of Loneliness in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's"" focuses on the deep sense of loneliness and emotional exile experienced by the Indian immigrants settled in the United States. It explores their sense of homelessness and their longings for their own country, their own people and culture. An attempt has been made to explore how cultural isolation results in personal isolation by discussing substantially about their inabilities to reconcile American culture with their Indian culture as represented in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's."

The term 'Diaspora' refers to "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions" (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 61). Earlier the term 'Diaspora' referred to 'Jewish exile', but later it came to be associated with people living outside their homeland. In the modern era, people from different cultures and countries are forced to live away from their own country for various reasons. The term 'Indian Diaspora' is used to describe people migrated from India and their descendants. Immigrant/Diasporic writers deal with the theme of displacement, alienation, cultural conflicts, identity crises, sense of homelessness, emotional, physical and mental isolation experienced by immigrants while trying to adapt to new language, people, culture and country.

Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the finest Indian Diasporic writers, deals with intercultural miscommunication and the physical and mental problems experienced by Indian immigrants while trying to adapt to a foreign culture. Her short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* interprets the conflicts in relationships between couples and the deep sense of loneliness and

emotional isolation experienced by Indian immigrants abroad. In “Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *"Interpreter of Maladies"* as a Short Story Cycle” Noelle Brada-Williams remarks:

Indeed, the text even transcends national boundaries, being set in both India and the United States. However, a deeper look reveals the intricate use of pattern and motif to bind the stories together, including the recurring themes of the barriers to and opportunities for human communication; community, including marital, extra-marital, and parent-child relationships; and the dichotomy of care and neglect. (451)

In this short story collection, she enunciates the problems and barriers caused by cultural tensions. Although most of the stories are set in Boston, some stories take place in India.

The short story entitled “Mrs Sen’s ” is the story of desolation and emotional isolation. It portrays Mrs. Sen’s intense longing for homeland and her separation from American culture. The story is filled with descriptions of cutting and chopping vegetables and preparations of recipes. These activities symbolically represent Mrs. Sen’s attempts to construct her identity through her cooking. In ‘Food ways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *"Interpreter of Maladies,"*’ Laura Ann Williams points out: “Food preparations becomes a way Mrs. Sen can construct her own identity and assert her subjectivity outside of any prescribed role as a newly immigrated spouse” (73). It depicts the experiences of Mrs. Sen, a Bengali housewife emigrated from Calcutta, India to United States for her husband’s profession. Mr. Sen, a Mathematics professor spends most of his time at an American university. In order to escape from the sense of loneliness, Mrs. Sen decides to become a baby-sitter for eleven year old boy named Eliot. The story is viewed through the eyes of Eliot. He is the child of an American single mother who leaves him with Mrs. Sen while she is at work.

Since Mrs. Sen husband is spending majority of his time at the university, she feels completely isolated. He is kind, but distant. She has none to share her sorrows and happiness in the new world. So she decides to become a baby-sitter hoping that would fetch her some happiness and writes a letter to Eliot’s Mother: "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home (*Interpreter of Maladies* 111).

She prepares Indian meal for her husband while he is at work. She totally engages herself in chopping vegetables for hours at a stretch with the powerful blade, she has brought from home:

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, as indicated by the two plates and two glasses she set, without napkins or silverware, on the square Formica table at one end of the living room (117).

The above extract indicates that every day she cooks for her husband who shows no affection to her. She is not experiencing the joy and happiness which a newly married woman would enjoy. The relationship between Mr. Sen and Mrs. Sen is similar to that of a master and a servant, where Mrs. Sen is meant for serving Mr. Sen. Without friends or relatives to chat with or share her joy and sorrow, Mrs. Sen is completely alone in the foreign land.

Eliot, a young American boy is also living through the same emotional and physical isolation experienced by Mrs. Sen. Since his mother is working, after his school he has to spend all afternoons with baby-sitters. The opening lines of the story present Eliot’s unpleasant experiences with baby-sitters:

The year before he was looked after by a university student named Abby, a slim, freckled girl who read books without pictures on their covers, and refused to prepare any food for Eliot containing meat. Before that an older woman, Mrs. Linden, greeted him when he came home each afternoon, sipping coffee from a thermos and working on crossword puzzles while Eliot played on his own. Abby received her degree and moved off to another university, while Mrs. Linden was, in the end, fired when Eliot's mother discovered that Mrs. Linden's thermos contained more whiskey than coffee. (111)

Since Eliot's father has deserted him, he is left under the care of a working mother. Living in a deserted vacation beach house with drunken, uncaring baby-sitters, he feels neglected and isolated. His mother never bothers to know the true needs of her son and claims: "Eliot is eleven. He can feed and entertain himself; I just want an adult in the house, in case of an emergency" (111). Instead of living in a deserted beach house, Eliot likes to spend his afternoons with Mrs. Sen in her apartment. In fact he takes pleasure in watching Mrs. Sen chopping vegetables.

Mrs. Sen communicates everything with Eliot despite the age difference. To her the word "home" means not the apartment in United States where she is residing at present, but the home in India. Mrs. Sen's conversation with Eliot's mother reveals this fact:

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. (113)

She expresses her loneliness and longings for her homeland. Eliot listens to her as she enthusiastically describes the variety and uniqueness of her life in Calcutta, India. Mrs. Sen's words clearly depict her food style, culture and living patterns:

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." Her profile hovered protectively over her work, confetti of cucumber, eggplant, and onion skins heaped around her. "It is impossible to fall asleep those nights, listening to their chatter." She paused to look at a pine tree framed by the living room window "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence. (115)

This passage reveals Mrs. Sen's longings for her own people, culture and country. She feels alienated and displaced from her home. In India, she is taken care not only by her parents, but also by her whole community. In short, people in her village consider themselves members of a single happy family and look after one another. Having come from a very expressive community, she finds it difficult to adapt herself in a new culture, where people could care less for their neighbours. The difference between the two cultures is depicted through the words of Mrs. Sen:

Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" "Mrs. Sen, what's wrong?" "Nothing. I am only asking if someone would come." Eliot shrugged. "Maybe" 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." By then Eliot understood that when Mrs. Sen said home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables. (116)

When Mrs. Sen shares her memories, Eliot realizes that in his culture nobody cares for others:

He thought of his own home, just five miles away, and the young married couple who waved from time to time as they jogged at sunset along the shore. On Labor Day they'd had a party. People were piled on the deck, eating, drinking, the sound of their laughter rising above the weary sigh of the waves. Eliot and his mother weren't invited. (116)

As Laura Ann Williams comments: "Receiving news of fresh fish from the local merchants is the only thing that makes her as happy as receiving mail from India. Food preparation is linked not only to Mrs. Sen's subjectivity, but also her ethnic identity and her ability to forge a connection with others" (74). Only two things make Mrs. Sen happy abroad. One is the arrival of a letter from her family and the other is the fish from the seashore. Her overwhelming happiness and excitement when she receives a letter from her family is shown through the narration:

For the first time she embraced him, clasping his face to her sari, surrounding him with her odor of mothballs and cumin. She seized the letter from his hands. As soon as they were inside the apartment she kicked off her slippers this way and that, drew a wire pin from her hair, and slit the top and sides of the aerogram in three strokes. Her eyes darted back and forth as she read. (121)

She feels connected to her own people and country, when she cooks and eats fish. Since she has come from a place where people eat fish as their staple food, she finds it difficult to live without it. She is sentimentally attached to it.

The knife which Mrs. Sen uses to chop vegetables symbolizes a lot to the readers. The Knife ties Mrs. Sen with her home. It also indicates that she is cut off from her own people:

She told Eliot, for grating. Each afternoon Mrs. Sen lifted the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle. Facing the sharp edge without ever touching it, she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, and 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 represents her own tradition and innocence in a place of new culture and confusion. The chores Mrs. Sen does in her home reflect how she is trying to hold on to her own culture and tradition. The things arranged in her home indicate her old tradition and connects Mrs. Sen to her

old life in India and what she misses. Each and every action of Mrs. Sen strongly represents her growing depression and her life of quiet desperation.

Both Mrs. Sen and Eliot experience the loneliness of having no family to care for them. Although Eliot and Mrs. Sen are from different backgrounds of life, they care for each other and enjoy each other's company. But soon after the accident, they are separated from each other. After the accident, Eliot has stopped coming to Mrs. Sen's apartment because his mother has told him that he is mature enough to look after himself. He seems to be missing her company, care and affection. The conclusive lines of the story reveal his deep sense of loss and loneliness:

The first day, just as he was taking off his coat, the phone rang. It was his mother calling from her office. "You're a big boy now, Eliot," she told him. "You okay?" Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine. (135)

It is said that the accident came quickly and "the damage was slight". But this statement ironically suggests that the damage to Mrs. Sen's psyche is not so slight. Once again, the author strongly emphasizes the common human factor, "emotional dependence" which binds Mrs. Sen and Eliot.

Thus the short story "Mrs Sen's" explores the deep sense of loneliness and isolation experienced by Mrs. Sen in a foreign land. It unfolds her longings for homeland and her attempts to connect herself with her old tradition and culture. In the modern era, many people immigrate to United States and encounter the problem of assimilation with a new culture. Mrs. Sen has gone to United States for a better life. But she is unhappy with her new life and misses her old life as she fails to reconcile American culture with her Indian culture.

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**DECLARATION**

I P. Karkuzhali hereby declare that the paper entitled “Emotional Exile: a Study of Personal Isolation and a Sense of Loneliness in Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s”” is an original work and has not been published anywhere else or sent for publication.