



Vol.5. S1., 2018



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

**LIMINALITY AND INDIAN DIASPORA WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN TWO STORIES OF
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S INTERPRETER OF MALADIES**

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Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), a collection of nine stories, seem to cover the reality of Indian Diaspora in the U.S. The reality as depicted in these stories is marked by liminality which characterizes the in-between state of affairs for the diaspora. For the people who have migrated from this country to the U.S pass through a complex of experience which constitutes the fulcrum of debate in *Interpreter of Maladies*. This debate is eloquent on liminality which absorbs subjectivity in their state of exile. The aim of the paper is to enquire into the liminality and Indian diaspora women's identity in two stories viz., "Mrs. Sen" and "Sexy" of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. While carrying out the study this paper takes recourse to postcolonialism with special emphasis on diaspora studies, new criticism and feminism. The paper follows the following hypotheses: First, Mrs. Sen is found to be searching for form in America. Secondly, an apparent contradiction between the Indian and American cultures is found to appear in "Mrs. Sen's" engagement with liminality. Thirdly, through culinary knowledge and its practice Mrs. Sen seems to negotiate her liminality in the U.S. Fourthly the liminal existence of Mrs. Sen is found to uncover the liminal existence of Eliot, an American young boy in America. Fifthly, Liminality, in "Sexy" seems to be shown through feminist cosmopolitics and transnational beauty assemblage. Sixthly, Indian women in the text are found to be endowed with beauty affects. Seventhly, Indian women are found to face xenophobia in the U.S.

Mrs. Sen is found to be searching for form in America. The liminal nature of Indian Americans also appear in their search for form as seen "Mrs. Sen's". This search for form or what Weihsin Gui calls "longing for form" (French 148) is actually a kind of aesthetics which is quite different from the perception of aesthetics "as elitist observation for pleasure into what Martin Jay sees as play, not only as a pleasurable distraction, but as tactic or strategy, that can inspire or catalyze transformation in the world" (French 148). This particular longing for form can be traced in Mrs. Sen who fails to get mingled with American culture and feels a strong sense of alienation there. A wife of a University Professor of Mathematics, alienated subject position drives her to search for a kind of form where she can define, assert and enjoy her own identity.

An apparent contradiction between the Indian and American cultures is found to appear in "Mrs. Sen's" engagement with liminality. Mrs. Sen's words "our home is quite clean, quite safe for a child." represents an ideal Indian home where love, care, emotion, compassion abound necessary for emotional sustenance (Lahiri 112). Her other words viz., "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home" shows her motherly aspect which is also deeply rooted in Indian ethos. On the other hand, the American life is too mechanical and individualistic as shown by the two previous babysitters Abbey and Mrs. Linden and Eliot's mother herself.

The liminal existence of Mrs. Sen is found to uncover the liminal existence of Eliot, an American young boy in America. The babysitting period creates a potent field of mutual interaction not only between Mr. Sen and Eliot but also between India and America which can certainly be called by using Bhabha's terms the "in-between" space or "third space" (Clifford 304-306). Indeed, a close reading of the text shows "the text actually opens up a subversive space, a space in which both cultures – that of the American (represented by

eleven-year –old Eliot) and the Indian (represented by Mrs. Sen) – undergo a very quiet, barely perceptible change, but still a change that eventually does make difference” (Caspari 246). The subversive nature of the text undoes the East West dichotomy and situates their encounter in a third space which is a meeting point of different cultures. Harte rightly comments on this act of subversion of Jhumpa Lahiri, “She develops muddy areas where cultures meet and mix to create a third space in which something new and productive becomes possible and transforms the character(s) (Harte 71). Harte, further, says that in “in-between areas” there is the collision and intermixing of binaries and rules out the possibility of one being majority and other minority. In such condition subjectivity experience transformation as seen both in the cases of Mrs. Sen and Eliot. The change of Mrs. Sen can be traced to her assumption of the role of a babysitter despite her being the wife of a university professor which is almost unthinkable in India and her preparation of Indian menu without their actual ingredients. Eliot’s change can be traced in his attaining maturity in the proximity of Mrs. Sen as seen, among others, his understanding of Mrs. Sen’s reference of home as India and his mother’s recognition of him as “You’re a bog boy now, Eliot”(Lahiri 135).

Liminality in “Sexy” seems to be shown through feminist cosmopolitics and transnational beauty assemblage. Assamblage, according to Deleuze and Guattari, herein implies “connection and heterogeneity” (Reddy 31) at the interaction stage between two distinct cultures which helps change in attitude, behavior and relation. An attempt has been made in the story to construct Indian woman as “elite cosmopolitan subjects” (Reddy 30) via media i.e., movie, and thereby reinforcing their affective capacities. The Indian women, who are thought to be at the fringe, actually highlight the insularity of an American woman. The insular subject position of an American woman named Miranda is brought to the fore by the beauty, fashionability and transnational mobility of Indian woman as shown in the story by Laxmi, more particularly by the image of iconic bollywood actress Madhuri Dixit. The cosmopolitics in the story lies in its portrayal of emerging Indian women who are found to belong to the standard of the present world through their agencies of beauty, fashionability and smartness.

Indian women in the text are found to be endowed with beauty affects. In the cultural encounter between the white American woman and Indian American women, as seen in “Sexy”, Indian women are found to be endowed with “affective force” (Reddy 32). This has come to the fore when Dev while talking to Miranda, the white American girl, with whom he has an extra marital affair, says that his wife resembles Madhuri Dixit, the iconic Bollywood actress. The anxiety to know Dev’s wife made Miranda “nervous” (Lahiri 98) and after the comparison with Madhuri Dixit, “Miranda’s heart stopped” (Lahiri 98) for an instant. This particular comparison between Madhuri Dixit and Dev’s wife made Miranda further restless to know Madhuri Dixit and thereby Dev’s wife. In order to have an idea of Madhuri Dixit, she even went to video renting Indian grocery.

Her influence over Deb is perceptible in that Deb was desperate to ensure timely telephonic conversation with her during her stay in India when he struck an extramarital affair with Miranda.

He explained that he couldn’t spend every night together at her place, because his wife called every day at six in the morning, from India, where it was four in the afternoon. And so he left her apartment at two, three, often as late as four in the morning, driving back to his house in the suburbs. During the day he called her every hour, it seemed, from work, or from his cellphone (Lahiri 88).

This can be said that Dev’s wife created “identification”(Reddy 33) in Dev through her affects for which he could not snap the tie with her. On the other hand, her affect on Miranda was seen in her “estrangement” that lies in “difference” (Reddy 33) and gradual withdrawal from the relationship with Dev. Initially, she thought that Madhuri Dixit with whom Deb’s wife looked alike would be like the Dixits, her neighbours in Michigan. It means that she was skeptical about the beauty of Bollywood’s iconic star and as such about the beauty of Deb’s wife. But her visit to the Indian grocery served as an eye opener for her, and she formed an idea of the beauty of the Indian actress and thereby the beauty of Dev’s wife. The exquisiteness of their beauty and blatant difference repelled her to the extent that it not only killed the warmth of their relation but also the very relation itself. Her failure to fathom the beauty of the Indian actress actually underscores her inassimilability into global culture and thereby revealing her insular subject position.

In Lahiri's story beauty operates not simply or primarily as a mode of (feminine) objectification/exoticization or as a form of neoliberal individualism, but as a deeply socializing force within moments of cross-cultural and interracial encounter. In structuring these encounters, beauty generates affects such as estrangement, identification and desire, which open onto articulations of citizenship and belonging. (Reddy 32-33)

Indian women are found to face xenophobia in the U.S. Miranda's inassimilability is found to be rampant vis a vis the Dixits in Michigan. Dev's comparison of his wife to Madhuri Dixit reminds Miranda of the Dixits whom Miranda has seen since her childhood. Initially the thought of Madhuri Dixit reminds her of the Dixits whom she considers to be low by standard. Miranda's views on the Dixits are out and out racist, and xenophobic, and this is seen in her reminiscence of the isolation faced by them at Michigan:

"The fathers complained that Mr. Dixit did not fertilize his lawn properly, did not rake his leaves on time, and agreed that the Dixit's house, the only one with vinyl siding, detracted from the neighborhood's charm. The mothers never invited Mrs. Dixit to join them around the Armstrong's swimming pool. Waiting for the school bus with the Dixit children standing to one side, the other children would say "The Dixits dig shit," under their breath, and then burst into laughter." (Lahiri 95)

Her thought of the Dixit surname, before her visit to the Indian grocery to see Madhuri on the covers of movie cassettes, is also seen to be characterized by the racial and xenophobic considerations. The thought of Madhuri Dixit triggered in her a process of 'racist homogenization of ethnic difference, since she assumes that a shared, non-white surname such as "Dixit" implies blood relation rather than a common regional and communal ancestry on the subcontinent' (Reddy 40). Similarly, her thought on the Dixit's girl – "She'd been plain, wearing her hair in two braids all through high school." (Lahiri 98) also falls in her racial scrutiny. Reddy rightly observes, "Miranda reinforces the Dixit girl's inassimilability into the mainstream since the reference to braids serves as Miranda's judgment of the girl's lack of mainstream style. Miranda's recycling of past racisms therefore frames her encounter with India's female beauty's affects" (Reddy 40). Interestingly, this narrow racist homogenization and prejudice of Miranda which defines her provincial and insular subjectivity is completely shattered much to her surprise and gloom, by the beauty affects of Indian iconic actress Madhuri Dixit. It is the beauty affects which constitutes Dev's wife's subject position who resembles Madhuri Dixit.

First, The third space in the text seems to be vocal on American loneliness resulted from its individualism. Actually the third space in the text generate an interesting counter text of Eliot's loneliness and thereby entire American loneliness against the narrative of loneliness of a Indian woman Mrs. Sen who has just migrated to America as a spouse of Indian professor. In Caspari's words – "Eliot becomes a subversive undercurrent to the story of a first generation immigrant, a woman suppressed by a dominant culture she does not feel part of or understand as well as by her dominant patriarchal husband" (Caspari 249).

Secondly, the liminal subject position of Mrs. Sen seem to make the title resonant with meaning. The absent noun in the title may refer to her agency or inability to do certain things on the fringe. Or it may refer to her ownership of "something sp(a/e)cial" (Caspari 249). If it is read from space point of view it may refer to her home and host countries or her in-betweenness, or her apartment etc., and if it refers to something special in her personality than it may refer to adaptability, vulnerability, and sensitivity. It may suggest her possibility or hopelessness in a foreign country and so on. Sounding a positive note on the title Laura Anh Williams observes.

The possessive form of Eliot's caretaker's name, "Mrs. Sen's" suggest her own ownership, while the possessed object remains intangible. Does the title refer to Mrs. Sen's relationship to Eliot ? To Mrs. Sen's longing for India ? To her special cooking knife or mountain of produce ? The apostrophe "s" suggests what is present and elusive in the story; that is, an alternative knowledge and autonomy which, while granted not full fruition in the course of the story, at least hints at more productive and nurturing ways of creating relationship with others (Williams 74-75).

Thirdly, the liminal space in America, as seen in the text, seems to be a fecund ground for cosmopolitics because cosmopolitics as observed by Ghosh, try to accomplish "political and ethical tasks of worlding" (Reddy 34). The accomplishment of this worlding is done through the little boy Rohin. The day when Miranda babysat him was very crucial given the fact that on that day Miranda acquired self realization of her mistake in falling in

love with a married person having a seven year old boy. This particular self realization was triggered when Rohin, the little boy insisted her on wearing the "silver cocktail dress" (Lahiri 105) and after her wearing of it, said, "You're sexy." (Lahiri 107). He told her "It means loving someone you don't know" (Lahiri 107). The words jolted and stunned her completely and ultimately enabled her to come away from her illicit relation with Dev.

The withdrawal of Miranda from her affair with Dev is undoubtedly the political and ethical task which makes the world beautiful. Lahiri is found to use language as medium for this political and ethical task of cosmopolitics and the word "sexy" is used as pun for the ethical worlding. In the era of globalization, where migration is a common phenomenon, liminal space is often seen as area of irresolution (Bhabha 224) and ethics is compromised in one way or the other as seen in the cases of Shukumar and Shobha in "A Temporary Matter", The Dases in "Interpreter of Maladies", and Laxmi's cousin and her husband in "Sexy". Lahiri locates Dev and Miranda exactly in this liminal space and through cosmopolitics tries to create a semblance of ethics for better world.

The two stories viz., "Mrs. Sen" and "Sexy" addresses the liminality being faced by Indian diaspora women in America. In these stories liminality is portrayed as a reality, and acknowledging its unavoidability Indian women are to define themselves. The liminal subject positions of Indian women, as seen in the stories, also uncover the liminality of Americans living on the fringe.

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