



CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT AND IDENTITY CONFLICT IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S MRS. SEN'S AND THE TREATMENT OF BIBI HALDAR

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ABSTRACT

The paper entitled “Cultural Displacement and Identity Conflict in Jhumpa Lahiri’s Mrs. Sen’s and The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” explores the pain of displacement of an immigrant, Mrs. Sen in a foreign land. She fails to adapt American life style and prefers to lead the life of a typical Indian woman who has not changed herself with the change of the culture and the surrounding. Keeping her culture alive even in America, reflects how much she wants to remain connected with her own tradition, customs and its people. In another short story The Treatment of Bibi Haldar, Jhumpa Lahiri not only highlights Indian traditions and cultural heritage but also the gender issues prevalent in the patriarchal society. The chief character Bibi Haldar, a 29 year old Bengali woman wants to get married but her hopes shatter when her cousin and his wife reject to perform her ceremony and consider her marriage an expensive affair. The story reveals the real picture of Indian society where a girl is supposed to be a burden on family members whose birth is not taken as an occasion but as mourning.

Key Words: Displacement, immigrant, culture, tradition, gender, marriage, society

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri’s the very first creation of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* won her applause, accolades and an esteemed Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in the year 2000. Jhumpa Lahiri an American author of Indian origin is born in London in 1967 in a Bengali family and is brought up in Rhode Island, U.S.A. The minute description of Indian culture in her works displays that how much Indian she is. “Jhumpa Lahiri, a perfect interpreter of a cultural multiplicity, is faithful enough to

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project Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms”.(Sarangi 146) Though she claims herself as an American writer yet her works completely reflects Indiannes. Throughout her life she lived in America but still she is well acquainted with Indian culture and its tradition. We do not get any glimpse of cultural barriers in her writings. She is an emigrated writer whose roots are still seated in India, her motherland. She takes Bengal, Boston and beyond as her setting. Her characters are generally Indians who live in America and suffer with nostalgia. For instance, Mrs. Sen the wife of a University Professor misses her family that lives in India so much that to get rid of loneliness and to engage herself, she becomes the caretaker of a young boy, Eliot. Mrs. Sen:

deals with the angst and anguish of the Indian migrants in the United States. The covert content of the book makes us realize that the diasporas coming out of one culture and inhabiting another feel themselves marginalized in the frame and when they are brought in to the centre of canvas, the margins of their own identities are subjected to the fading realities. (Chhabbra 71)

The character of Mrs. Sen itself demonstrates Jhumpa Lahiri’s knowledge regarding India. Now, even after staying in America, Mrs. Sen has not given up her culture. She still adheres to her moral values which she has inherited from her parents. The western culture fails to influence the ideology of Indian diaspora, Mrs. Sen. Even in a foreign land, Mrs. Sen treats her guests like god. Every evening she serves Eliot’s mother “ something to eat: a glass of bright pink yogurt with rose syrup, breaded mincemeat with raisins, a bowl of semolina halva”.(Lahiri 118) She still wears saris, a dress which not only completely covers a woman but also beautifies her. She applies vermilion in her part, a dot on her forehead and wears bangles in her hands which are the symbols of marital assurance and are considered very important for a married Indian woman. Jhumpa Lahiri has portrayed, Mrs. Sen as a very typical Indian woman who has not changed herself with the change of the culture and the surrounding. Her bangles, a dot, and vermilion demonstrate that like any other Indian woman she also has a faith in the practices. Not only her external appearance but the setting and decoration of her home also give the impression of Indiannes. For example mothballs and cumin, the sofa covers “printed with rows of elephants bearing palanquins on their backs” (Lahiri 115) depict typical Indian pattern. Keeping her culture alive even in America reflects how much she wants to remain connected with her own tradition, customs and its people.

Instead of using a knife she chops vegetables with a blade that “curved like prow of Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas”. (Lahiri 114) She chops vegetables seated on a newspaper in a typical Indian style, sometimes cross-legged and sometimes with splayed legs. At times she suffers with nostalgic feeling and tells Eliot how Indian people come to express their joys and grief in a single voice. How on any occasion or ceremony women of



neighborhood bring their blades and chop fifty kilograms of vegetables overnight sitting in a circle on the roof of a building. This custom to share work exists only in Indian villages and towns. Bengal is Lahiri's native land and thus she very well knows that Bengali people are fond of eating fish. They "ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky"(Lahiri 123) and because Mrs. Sen too is deep rooted in Bengali tradition "the other thing that made Mrs. Sen happy was fish from the sea side".(Lahiri 123) Through these kinds of information, Eliot also learns something about Indian culture. Mrs. Sen gladly describes customs and habits of Indians to him and gradually he also adapts some of these like he also started putting off his sneakers at Mrs. Sen's door way and putting them on the bookcase.

Through the character of Mrs. Sen, the writer has very precisely depicted the customs and traditions practiced in Indian families. She has minutely mentioned the details of Bengali culture in such a profound manner that it becomes difficult to believe that she is a stranger to India. Even after living with her husband, Mrs. Sen experiences loneliness and displacement in a strange country but she forgets her alienation and the feeling that she has been uprooted from motherland when she receives a letter "crammed with stamps showing a bald man at a spinning wheel, and blackened by postmarks" (Lahiri 121) that is actually the picture of Mahatma Gandhi. The happiness which the letter brings on her countenance, presents the picture of an Indian woman who is suffering from the sense of isolation and alienation in a foreign land. "The thirst for roots drives Jhumpa and her characters to India. In the process, Jhumpa looks for Indian traditions, cultural heritage, sculpture and the life-way of the Indians. She finds an oblique relation to them". (Sarangi 148)

Jhumpa Lahiri has presented such relation, Indian traditions and cultural heritage in her another short story, *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* which has its setting in India. The chief protagonist Bibi Haldar is a twenty-nine year old woman yet unmarried suffers from "an ailment that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and fools". (Lahiri 158) The writer has tried to present the different shades and beliefs of Indian people, some scientific, some religious and some orthodox. To cure Bibi Haldar some people bring water from seven holy rivers, some advise her to visit and "kiss the tombs of saints and martyrs". (Lahiri 158) Few gird her arms and neck with amulets to keep her against the evil eyes. Few people ask her to wear auspicious rings in her fingers. Some wise men of the town "had massaged eucalyptus balm into her temples, steamed her face with herbal infusions". (Lahiri 158) The story also reflects the religious belief of a father who gives up eating meat on Friday, the fasting day, to please god to cure his daughter. If on the one hand, the various suggestions made by people reflect backwardness and superstitions of Indians then on the other hand, undoubtedly, it reflects that the social system in India is very strong.



The very first paragraph of the story *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* presents the worry not only of her family members but also of the whole town. Another example of brotherhood can be seen in the story when Bibi Haldar collapses and soon people rush to calm her “bearing palm fans and sugar cubes, and tumblers of refrigerated water to pour on her head”. (Lahiri 161) Another incident when she suffers from the attack of hysteria “a group encircled the convulsing girl at once, eager to assist in whatever way possible”. (Lahiri 167) People are worried and watch her in a helpless condition. These incidents in the story present the backwardness of Indian culture but they also show that Jhumpa Lahiri though not born and brought up in India has a profound realistic knowledge of Indian people, their ideology, their religion, and their tradition. “Ideology, language, and culture are the very issues of debate in Jhumpa Lahiri’s book”. (Chhabbra 71) She has very artfully explored the sick psyche of Indian people through the characterization of Bibi Haldar’s sister-in-law who instead of treating Bibi Haldar as a hysterical patient keeps distance from her as if this is a contagious disease and is therefore fearful of her presence. “The wife, convinced that Bibi’s presence would infect the unborn child, began to wrap woolen shawls around her tumid belly. In the bathroom Bibi was given separate soaps and towels. According to the scullery maid, Bibi’s plates were not washed with the others”. (Lahiri 167) This apathy towards a patient highlights negative image of Indians.

On the other hand, the doctor suggests marriage as the right remedy for Bibi Haldar’s ailment. He feels that in her sub-conscious mind she suffers from insecurity and due to this she has developed an abnormal behavior. Now and then she expresses her intense desire of getting married but in her anxiety she behaves foolishly and time and again asks “my face will never be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card”. (Lahiri 160-161) Jhumpa Lahiri has successfully depicted the worry of Bibi Haldar, a marriageable woman, who too wants a man in her life. Her worry and desire to get married imply that she believes that men are the protectors and they shape the life of women and therefore she also considers marriage as an important event of life. In *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*, Jhumpa Lahiri has given the complete minute details of Bengali marriage “butter poured in fires, garlands exchanged, vermilion-painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins”. (Lahiri 160) As soon as the news of Bibi Haldar’s marriage spread in the town, grandmothers commence consulting almanacs to decide the favorable hours for the wedding which again presents the beliefs of Indians in horoscope and astrology. Her neighboring friends prepare her for the interview.

Most likely the groom will arrive with one parent, a grandparent, and either an uncle or aunt. They will stare, ask several questions. They will examine the bottoms of your feet, the thickness of your braid. They will ask you to name the



prime minister, recite poetry, feed a dozen hungry people on half a dozen eggs. (Lahiri 165)

Here Jhumpa Lahiri gives a vivid picture of Indian marriages. She beautifully depicts how a girl before marriage is minutely observed from top to bottom, how she is interviewed by a number of people from groom's side. But the hopes of Bibi Halder shatter the very moment when her cousin and his wife blatantly reject to perform her ceremony. To marry her off has been an expensive affair. He does not want to waste his money on "feeding guests, ordering bracelets, buying a bed, assembling a dowry". (Lahiri 164) This presents the real picture of Indian society where a girl is supposed to be a burden on family members whose birth is not taken as an occasion but as mourning. The girl child is always considered the "powerful means of withdrawal, regression, decay, death and destruction". (Myles 60) Since her birth she becomes the cause of tension to her parents who circulates her photographs to get an eligible man and the parents spend their entire lives in assembling dowry for their daughter.

Jhumpa Lahiri has highlighted the evils of the Indian society. The aforesaid description makes it clear that despite being an American citizen, Jhumpa Lahiri has still clutched her roots tightly. As a Diasporic writer, her stories not only create the images leading to nostalgia but also contain rich and realistic description of Indian Bengali traditions and culture. The characters, if they are Indians, are very close to life. They seem people living next door. To conclude, though Jhumpa Lahiri refuses to acknowledge herself as an Indian yet her stories abound in Indianism and it is through these stories she establishes her identity as a diaspora writer.

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