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Migrating Mindsets: Womanhood, Culture and Ethnicity

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to present the upliftment of Indian Diaspora, Culture and Ethnicity through women writings and to show how efficiently women writers have penned down the struggles of women who left their homelands and are living abroad. We attempted to throw some light on the works of one of the very talented gem of women writers, Nilanjana Sudeshana better known as Jhumpa Lahiri, who focused upon the Diasporic writings.

At the beginning, we will discuss the meaning and origin of Diaspora, the trajectory of culture and ethnicity along with our point of view which is put forwarded and supported through the works of Jhumpa Lahiri. We have tried to examine the topic, especially from the perspective of women characters and prominently those which took shape from the pen of the renowned women writer Jhumpa Lahiri, to discuss and expand our idea.

Since women have played vital roles in the society in every sphere so the women writers too have left their marks in the field of literature through their writings, they have taken up the challenge to portray the mental challenges of female characters which comes after experiencing the dislocation, alienness and the actualization of a life of exile, so we will elaborate our idea with this point because we believe that women are treated as expatriates in their homeland in a way because they move from their maternal land, at one point of time in their lives, to settle in their marital homes, so when the situation comes when they need to move from their homeland to an unknown territory, leaving their motherland behind for the sake of studies and mostly to get settled with their families after marriage in countries like the U.S.A., U.K. or Canada etc. they find it difficult to survive initially due to the difference in culture, language, cuisine, community and moreover due to the difference in perception too.

We will conclude the paper with the analysis of the mindsets of Jhumpa Lahiri's characters through which she tried to portray how the people who migrated from India hold on to their cultural heritage and reshaped their identities and posited new social linkages.

1. Introduction

The motive of this paper i.e. "Migrating Mindsets: Womanhood, Culture and Ethnicity" is to contemplate over the lives and sensibilities of the work of those female immigrants who either belong to the first generation or they are the children of the second generation immigrants, living in the alien countries which they try hard to assimilate in or they are expatriates who goes to the new country in order to get recognition or want to let themselves free from the shackles of bondages which are not physical, but mental or psychological. In this attempt how do they keep resurrecting the Indian culture and ethnicity in alien lands is remarkable and we are focusing on this aspect in this paper. We have chosen two of Lahiri's female characters for this purpose, Mrs. Sen, a first generation immigrant from *Interpreter of Maladies* and Rooma, who belongs to the second generation from Lahiri's short stories collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*.

Before we move further to analyze these physical, psychological or mental conditions of people, especially women, moving in the new world, it is necessary to know about Jhumpa Lahiri a little.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a Bengali American author who was born in 1967 in London to a Bengali Indian immigrant parents. They moved to South Kingstown, Rhode Island when she was child. Lahiri considers herself an American, stating, "I wasn't born here, but I might as well have been". Jhumpa Lahiri learned her Bengali heritage from her mother from a very early age. She is the daughter of Amar Lahiri librarian and schoolteacher. Lahiri's mother wanted her children to grow up knowing their Bengali heritage, and her family often visited relatives in Kolkata. It seems that in her stories the cultural hold which is visible in her female characters is just because of her own Indian upbringing by her mother. Right from a very young age she felt strong ties for her parents' homeland India, as well as the United States and England. A sense of homelessness and an inability to feel accepted took place as she grew up with ties to all three countries. To her it is an inheritance of her parents' ties to India.

Her major works includes a collection of short stories, *Interpreter of maladies*, *Unaccustomed Earth* and a novel *The Namesake*.

2. Diaspora: Meaning and Implications

Since our concern is Indian Diaspora it becomes necessary for us to discuss this word in this process. The first mention of a Diaspora created as a result of exile is found in the 'Septuagint' in the phrase "esē diaspora en pasais basileias tēs gēs" translated to mean "thou shalt be dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth". Its use began to develop from this original sense when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek; in Ancient Greece the term διασπορά (*diaspora*) meant "scattering" and was used to refer to citizens of a dominant city-state who emigrated to a conquered land with the purpose of colonization, to assimilate the territory into the empire. The term derives from the verb διασπείρω (*diaspeirō*), "I scatter", "I spread about" and that form διά (*dia*), "between, through, across" + the verb σπείρω (*speirō*), "I sow, I scatter". After the Bible's translation into Greek, the word *Diaspora* then was used to refer to which means "scattering, dispersion", it is "the movement, migration, or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland" or "people dispersed by whatever cause to more than one location", or "people settled far from their ancestral homelands". The word has also come to refer to historical mass-dispersions of people with common roots, particularly movements of an involuntary nature, such as the expulsion of Jews from the Middle East, the African Trans-Atlantic slave trade, Tibetans who fled their homeland with the Dalai Lama in 1959 to escape the brutal invasion and occupation by China, or the century-long exile of the Messenians under Spartan rule.

The word Diaspora always denotes two different feelings. It projects and makes the immigrant feel like an ambassador of his culture as well as refugee. While the one projects to spread one's culture and enhance the ability to enhance it well, whereas the other tries to seek refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture. Further, it could be categorized through the use of such words as immigrant, exile, refugee, expatriate and people searching for their roots etc.

3. Element of Womanhood, Culture & Ethnicity in Food, Customs and Language

As our Sub theme is women writing in respect to the trajectory of Indian Diaspora, Culture and ethnicity, we believe that voice for women empowerment and feminism is always been a topic of concern for the society. In the literary field also this voice is powerfully raised through the emphatic writings of those Indian women writers, who left their homeland for settling in a new land. They chose to write about their own country, its culture and ethnicity etc. Since it is an indispensable part of women's lives that they leave their maternal home to become a part of their marital home in the similar way when they leave their motherland mostly to move along with their husbands or children and sometimes to study abroad this longing for their homeland increases and come out through writings. Although they leave their country of their birth but their heart remains in their homeland their sensibilities remain Indian even after living abroad for so many years. They find it hard to survive, initially due to the difference in culture, language, community and moreover the difference in perception too.

This paper 'Migrating mindsets: Womanhood, Culture & Ethnicity' supports the topic of today's seminar 'Trajectory of Indian Diaspora Its Culture Race and Ethnicity.' Our objective is to analyze the women characters judging from Lahiri's perspective and her own cultural growth in this process.

It is most common for people to migrate from their country of origin to new places with different cultural traditions and values and these individuals when come to these distant lands are classified as immigrants, expatriates and Diaspora. However they can be differentiated from one another from their ways of assimilation, although it becomes so difficult for people to fully integrate themselves into an alien land and culture yet not letting go their own culture and ethnicity and stay connected to their homeland. In the short story, "Mrs. Sen's," Mrs. Sen herself can be seen as an expatriate, as she tries to find a balance between adapting to American culture yet upholding her Indian roots. If we accept Bharati Mukherjee's definition of expatriation as, "an act of sustained self-removal from one's resistance to total inclusion in the new host society" (Mukherjee 71), then we can understand Mrs. Sen as someone struggling to maintain her own culture in a different place, as opposed to someone who is simply stubborn.

The Indian essence which comes naturally with the women characters of Lahiri is appealing in a way as it is with Mrs. Sen. She resist total inclusion are shown as she yearns for the same warmth and selfless community in order to achieve that she practices daily Indian rituals.

This becomes a barrier that prevents her from fully adapting to American culture as she establishes herself as an Indian woman; a detached outsider who never allows herself to fully absorb an American way of life.

Her dressing style startles Eliot as he compares her mother's attire with that of Mrs. Sen's:

'She wore a shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys, more suitable for an evening affair than for that quiet, faintly drizzling August afternoon. Her lips were coated in a complementary coral gloss and a bit of the color had strayed beyond the borders.' (Lahiri 112), unlike Eliot's mother who donned cuffed, beige shorts and who looked odd. Her cropped hair a shade similar to her shorts, seemed too lank and sensible and in that room all things were so carefully covered her shaved knees and thighs too exposed. (Lahiri 113)

This observation by Eliot not only amuses us, but also lead us to think about Mrs. Sen's adherence to her culture so strongly.

At the same time the pain of being so aloof from her homeland & culture seems evident in her eyes through the promptness of her reply to Eliot's mother when she mentions the word 'India'. The mere mention of the word seemed to release something in her. She looked around the room, as if she noticed in the lampshades, in the teapot, in the shadows frozen on the carpet, something the rest of them could not. "Everything is there." This quote is an example that everything around her belongs to her and her identity which makes her feel connected to India. The description by Eliot again amuses us when he says 'Mrs. Sen's slippers, each a different color, with soles as flat as cardboard and a ring of leather to hold her big toe.' (Lahiri 113)

Humour mixed with longing when she tells Eliot wistfully that “At her home just by raising your voice a bit, or express grief or joy whole neighborhood and half of another comes to share the news, to help with arrangements and Eliot understands that Mrs. Sen means India.(Lahiri 116)”

Mukherjee explains that the expatriate “asks only that the host culture permit him or her to retain an alien core that will not be compromised or surrendered” (Mukherjee 72), helping us again attach her to this identity. One could easily read “Mrs. Sen’s” and see her as a woman who is simply resisting change in an obstinate fashion, but if we take up Mukherjee’s definition of expatriation from her essay, “Imagining Homelands,” and use this as “a new sensitive lens,” we can arrive at the understanding that Mrs. Sen is merely someone struggling with the difficulty of embracing a new culture while trying to keep her past traditions alive. She consciously or sub-consciously resists complete inclusion into the American culture by showing her obstinacy by denial to go to driving classes, negotiating with the shopkeeper in the fish market just what an American would not do. When the man from the supermarket calls her, she is overjoyed.

He assumed she wanted fish, and said he would hold it until the end of day under her name. She was flattered. “Isn’t that nice of him, Eliot? The man said he looked up my name in the telephone book. He said there is only one Sen. Do you know how many Sens are in the Calcutta telephone book?” The childlike joy after hearing someone mentioning her is evident. Although this seems quite simple but it is not, as it her reaction towards the feeling less American society where nobody cares to talk to each other, whereas in India people are connected with each other in joys and sorrows. Mrs. Sen sees this comparison as an emotionally detached observation as she notices a major difference in the amount of personal distance that exists between individuals in America versus the intimacy she feels with those around her in India. The feeling of isolation forbids her to search for a sense of community. She feels proud of her association with Indian culture and her acquaintances there who are ever helpful and easily connect themselves to others’ joys and sorrows even if they are not directly known to each other.

In India womanhood is compared to motherhood because it is the woman who are supposed to be loving, caring and feeding her children and women not only does it wholeheartedly but also excels in it along with their expertise in household works. It is quite opposite to the American society where women are not supposed to do household chores, taking care of children and considered to be equal to men and that is why they have no sense of duty to raise the children like Indian mothers. This is quite visible throughout her many conversations with Eliot, it is clear she sees the American culture as distant and cold, especially when Eliot describes his neighborhood and how little a relationship he has with them. However although Mrs. Sen has a difficulty with the clash between the American way and her Indian traditions, she upholds her identity as a woman by playing the role of a mother like figure to Eliot. It is evident throughout the story that the relationship between Eliot and his mother is essentially non-existent, and that he seems to look up to Mrs. Sen as if he were her son. He starts to really enjoy going to Mrs. Sen’s house after school, watching her do her kitchen chores of chopping vegetables and meat. He observes her every day, and from his place on the couch, he can sense the specific smells and see details of her daily physical appearance. Along the path to self-discovery, Mrs. Sen attempts to balance her life between two opposite cultures. As an Indian woman in an American community she struggles to define herself with an appropriate role that combines her Indian culture with the American way. However even through this inner battle she fights, Mrs. Sen try to provide Eliot motherly love in a supportive and nurturing environment, helping him to feel less lonely within his own culture. It is as if she is trying to provide Eliot with what she sees as lacking in the American culture. The relationship between Eliot and Mrs. Sen helps her bridge the gap dividing her two worlds without her even realizing it. For a woman in Indian culture, being a loving mother and trusting friend fulfills her role in society. By Mrs. Sen providing these characteristics to a boy whose life will now be forever changed because of her, she is able to accomplish her goal of being an expatriate by upholding her Indian womanhood within the American culture.

4. References

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