

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

“A Mythic Place of Desire”: The Diasporic Woman’s Quest for Home and Identity

Sunanda Ray

Associate Professor and HOD, Department of English, Maharaja Srischandra College, Kolkata, India
Guest Lecturer, Department of English, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

In this paper I explore the issues of diasporic identity and subject formation of Indian women by attempting to examine the ways in which a female protagonist of a literary text constructs her own subjectivity in an alien country. I look at the ways in which the immigrant woman negotiates her identity and how national identity acquires a meaning in a diasporic space. I also explore the notion of “home” which is of paramount importance to the diasporic woman for she must create for herself a feeling of belonging and being at “home” amidst the alienation, isolation and marginalization that she is compelled to face. The diasporic woman has to negotiate her identity and her sense of belonging between home as the place of origin and home as the “experience of locality” in an alien country. I argue that in constantly moving between cultures, attempting to negotiate an identity for herself and to create a sense of home and belonging, the female protagonist acquires agency. She makes a conscious effort to maintain her Indian identity and her endeavour involves her various acts of resistance against the intersection of racism, patriarchy and displacement from all that is familiar and comfortable. The simple acts of resistance constitute her agency and help her articulate her subjectivity in the interstitial space of her diasporic existence.

Keywords: *Diaspora, identity, subjectivity, agency, resistance*

In this paper I explore the issues of diasporic identity and subject formation of Indian women by attempting to examine the ways in which a female protagonist of a literary text constructs her own subjectivity in an alien country. I look at the ways in which the immigrant woman negotiates her identity and how national identity acquires a meaning in a diasporic space. I also explore the notion of “home” which is of paramount importance to the diasporic woman for she must create for herself a feeling of belonging and being at “home” amidst the alienation, isolation, and marginalization that she is compelled to face. Avtar Brah has defined “home” for diasporic people as “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’. On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality” (Brah,1997:192). The diasporic woman has to negotiate her identity and her sense of belonging between home as the place of origin and home as the “experience of locality” in an alien country. I look at the notion and representation of home in the story “Mrs. Sen’s” from Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*. (1999). I argue that in constantly moving between cultures, attempting to negotiate an identity for herself and to create a sense of home and belonging, the female protagonist acquires agency. The diasporic space ultimately becomes the site for resistance and articulation of her valiant effort to form subjectivity.

The experience of migration and diaspora have often been represented in universalized terms. However, the universalizing discourses cannot represent with authenticity the ways in which the experience of diaspora is also marked by gender, class, and sexuality and by the different histories that shape the movement of each group. Despite so much theorizing of the concept of diaspora, the ways in which women negotiate their identities in diaspora had been a relatively understudied area until recently. James Clifford in his essay, “Diasporas” points out that there is a tendency for theoretical accounts of diasporas to hide the fact that diasporic experiences are always gendered. He deplores the proclivity “to talk of travel and displacement in unmarked ways, thus normalizing male experiences” (Clifford,1994:313). Clifford also underscores the painful duality of women’s experience in diasporic situations---they struggle with the insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of patriarchies. However, despite these hardships they may refuse the option of returning to their homeland, especially when the terms and conditions are dictated by men. Clifford suggests that women in diasporic space remain attached to and feel empowered by a “home” culture and tradition. “Fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social patterns, and food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the host country” (314). Clifford affirms that these are survival strategies for diasporic women in their new context. They connect and disconnect, remember and forget in strategic ways. “The lived experiences of diasporic women thus involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds” (314).

In his seminal essay, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” Stuart Hall thinks of diasporic identity as a “production” which is never complete but always in process. He points out that such a conception played a significant role in postcolonial struggles and movements such as Negritude. Hall’s definition of cultural identity acknowledges that along with similarities there are significant differences which constitute “what we really are”. Therefore, identity is as much a matter of ‘becoming’ as of ‘being’. Hall works against the dichotomies of self and other, them

and us. Using Derrida's notion of "difference", Hall points out that the play of difference within identity cannot be represented as a binary opposition. He theorizes Caribbean cultural identity in relation to three presences---Africaine, Europeanne, and Americaine. He concludes that diaspora does not refer to scattered tribes whose identity can be established in relation to a homeland to which they must return at all costs. Diaspora is instead defined by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity. (Hall, 1996:110-19). Diasporic female subjectivity can be formulated by heterogeneity and diversity that Hall proposes as imperative for diasporic identity. Through a redefinition of the self, the diasporic woman is able to redefine her notion of self and the nation in which she resides. Thus identity formation in diaspora is not a question of simple assimilation or essentialist formulations. On the contrary, it is a complex combination of one's own culture along with appropriating elements of the alien culture, thereby formulating a new sense of being. This is not a passive process and therefore involves agency. This also helps to create an integrated sense of one's own subjectivity.

Bidisha Banerjee points out the significance of Keya Ganguly's study of the middle-class Indian women who have emigrated to the United States in the late sixties and the early seventies. She argues that diasporic women are "subjected by the double articulation of discourses of cultural difference and patriarchy. This makes their attempts to negotiate their selfhood in their daily life both more interesting and perhaps more exemplary of the contradictory conditions within which subaltern experience is represented and lived" (Banerjee, 2004:29). Banerjee elaborates how these women remember a fabricated past and refuse their well-being in the diasporic present. Thus the role of memory becomes important in the formulation of their diasporic identity and the creation of subjectivity. Quoting Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, Banerjee suggests that they engage with the notion of "being home" ---"the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries" and of "not being home" which they describe as "the realization that home is an illusion of coherence and safety based on exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself" (Banerjee, 2004: 47). Banerjee posits that while the latter realization can be a liberatory prospect for the diasporic woman, the home achieves a particular significance in the context of diaspora---it brings with it feelings of stability, security, and belonging that help in the formation of a diasporic identity. Identity formation thus becomes closely related with the politics of location and belonging.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a collection of moving and powerful stories about South Asian immigrants and the complex mechanics of their adjustment to new circumstances, relationships and cultures. Referring to the book as a "heralded collection", Vijay Mishra suggests that "the point made by the *Wall Street Journal* ('Ms Lahiri expertly captures the out-of-context lives of immigrants, expatriates and first-generation Americans of Indian descent'), is worth noting, for it captures the collection's decisive orientation towards anxieties of the diaspora in the place where they are at, not where they came from" (Mishra,2007:191). Mishra argues that Lahiri's stories touch "delicately on an emotional register" which is often overlooked in theorizations about diaspora (192). Very sensitively she explores and delineates the lived experiences of diasporic bodies as individuals and as people with their very human dilemmas.

Lahiri's collection begins with the story entitled, "A Temporary Matter". It is the tale of a couple emotionally estranged from each other after the death at birth of their baby. Apart from their names---Shukumar and Shobha--- and a few references to Indian cuisine and power cuts in India, the story is a sensitive portrayal of a relationship that has become far too fragile to be able to move on. In the diaspora there is no extended family who could supply emotional support. The collection ends with "The Third and Final Continent", the story of a young male student who arrives in America from India via England, in search of a good and prosperous life. Toward the end of the story, the protagonist has been in America for over thirty years and prides himself for his ability to "survive on three continents" (Lahiri, 1999:197). His wife Mala does not face any problem in the adjustment and acculturation process in the United States. As a diasporic woman she does not have to struggle with her identity formation. Her process of assimilation appears to be quite spontaneous and without any stress or conscious endeavour. Juxtaposed between these two and other stories about diasporic life and identity, "Mrs. Sen's" is the only story in Lahiri's collection that deals with a South Asian diasporic woman's quest for home and identity.

Lahiri presents Mrs. Sen as being trapped in between two notions of home alluded to by Avtar Brah: home as the place of origin and home as the experience of locality in an alien country. She keeps herself occupied by babysitting for an American boy Eliot. She feels stressed and agonized by the pressure of adapting to American way of life. Through much of the story she struggles to recreate her home of origin, i.e. India in the diasporic space of United States by resurrecting romanticized and idealized memories of her pre-immigrant life in India and by transposing elements of that life, coloured with nostalgia, into her new life in the United States. Instead of trying to assimilate into the American way of life, as most immigrants do, she strives to transpose and translocate her notion and perception of home to her diasporic life in the American northeast. Her nostalgic yearning for the life in India makes her recreate her past in the space of the present. This constant endeavour is also a valiant attempt to negotiate her identity and her sense of belonging and she draws sustenance from it.

In *The Location of Culture* Homi Bhabha suggests that "It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond" and being in the beyond is inhabiting an intervening space (Bhabha, 2006:1). He argues that the "borderline work of culture...creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living." (10). Bhabha then posits his theory of the unhomely by defining unhomeliness as "the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations" (13). He continues, "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomed' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (13). Thus, according to Bhabha, the unhomely opens up a space of articulation that lies in between the spaces of the home and the world, of the private and the public. This new "in-between" space provides the terrain for initiating new signs of identity and the site for contestation and collaboration. This is a space of resistance as well as accommodation. It is in this interstitial space that cultural differences are negotiated. It is from this interstitial space that a new discourse that bridges the home and the world can be articulated. This new space becomes the locus of operation of "cultural translation" and allows for the development of alternative discourses and the agency of the individual in such a

development. Such a space would be particularly useful for the diasporic woman since it offers an alternative model to the easy assimilation that is often recommended as a survival strategy for the immigrant woman.

Banerjee suggests that the structural systems of oppression that work against Mrs. Sen disallow the formation of this in-between space from where she can articulate her subjectivity. For Mrs. Sen the binaries between home and the world, us and them, remain firmly reiterated and despite her valiant efforts, “she is unable to overcome and redefine on her terms the stereotyping script imposed upon her”. (Banerjee, 2004:51). My argument is that in Lahiri’s story, Mrs. Sen succeeds in her struggle to inhabit this interstitial space of resistance and accommodation. Her attempt to recreate and relive the past suggests the return of the repressed that Bhabha elaborates as a condition for postcolonial subjectivity. From this in-between space Mrs. Sen redefines her self and her sense of belonging and negotiates her identity.

By walking down the memory lane, she recreates her pre-immigrant life in India for Eliot. In a typical Indian way, she sits on the floor and chops vegetables on a newspaper using the traditional Indian curved knife. She reminisces about weddings and celebrations in India when women “sit in an enormous circle on the roof of the building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night...it is impossible to fall asleep those nights listening to their chatter” (Lahiri,1999:115). She then painfully acknowledges the quiet solitude of her life in the United States: “Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence” (115). Referring to Ganguly’s study of the everyday lives of Indian immigrants, Banerjee points out that the communal nature of food preparation and consumption is an integral part of festivities in the diasporic community. Quoting Ganguly she writes, “...within immigrant Indian circles, the social fact of food is elevated to the status of a properly *communal* fetish, attaching itself to the collective meaning of being Indian” (Banerjee,2004:52). Since Lahiri does not mention any immigrant Indian community for Mrs. Sen to interact with, it seems that she suffers from a feeling of alienation and is deprived of a communal ethnic identity. The elaborate ritual of cutting vegetables in the traditional Indian way every afternoon is a daily struggle to recreate and re-affirm her own ethnic identity in the private, domestic space of her household. This daily ritual provides her a sense of belonging to an “imagined community” and helps her negotiate a deep sense of isolation and marginalization.

Banerjee also reiterates the importance Ganguly attaches to the role of memory of the homeland in shaping the diasporic psyche of Indian immigrants. “For these particular people, recollections have taken on a special import because they represent the only set of discursive understandings which can be appropriated and *fixed*; disambiguating the past permits people to make sense of uncertainties in the present” (Banerjee, 2004:54). Mrs. Sen tries to renovate and appropriate her memories of the past in an effort to refashion and redefine herself. For her, it is a way of coming to terms with her present and it also helps her to recuperate a sense of the self. Lahiri describes in detail the care with which Mrs. Sen cooks elaborate meals each day. She also delineates the intricate details of Mrs. Sen’s décor of a university apartment which is transformed to look like a middle-class home in India. Mrs. Sen’s obsession with procuring fresh fish and cooking it elaborately is another way of holding on to the pre-immigrant life in India.

By trying to resurrect the memory of her life in India, Mrs. Sen tries to recreate the home which Avtar Brah has defined as “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination” (Brah, 1997:192). She attempts to concretize that home through her memories and the symbols of that life she has brought back with her. She endeavours to draw sustenance from the objects and memories of her past life in India by resuscitating and transposing them to her present diasporic life. She somewhat succeeds in her attempt to encapsulate the dynamism and significance of the life she has left behind. The second notion of home that Brah postulates is what she describes as the “lived experience of locality” (192). She suggests that though this home has the associated traumas of dislocation, it is also a space for new hope and new beginning. For Mrs. Sen, this home is a space for hope and significance since she is able to create a sense of identity and belonging here.

Referring to Ganguly’s study, Banerjee comments on the lack of social exchange between the Americans and the immigrants of the minority communities, primarily because of a discomfort on the latter’s part in attempting to fraternize with the white Americans (Banerjee, 2004:58). But Mrs. Sen interacts freely with pre-adolescent Eliot as long as he is with her. She shares her sense of loneliness, alienation, her nostalgia, and every minute detail of her humdrum life with him. She feels comfortable confiding in him some of her innermost sorrows and torments although he is unable to fully comprehend her pain and empathize with her. She cooks elaborate meals for Eliot and waits for him everyday at the bus stop “as if eager to greet a person she hadn’t seen in years” (Lahiri, 1999:119). She also tries to socialize with Eliot’s mother offering her food and starting a conversation when she comes to pick her son on her way back home from work. She thus makes a sincere effort to build connections with the alien world that she now calls her new home.

Lahiri also delineates in a subtle manner Mrs. Sen’s feeling of alienation from her husband. Mr. Sen is too self-absorbed to realize the acute loneliness and isolation of his wife. He appears to be a caring husband providing for his wife and trying to perform his duties. But in his preoccupation with himself and his career, he betrays a detachment for Mrs. Sen and a complete lack of empathy. He refuses to take her to the beach to buy fresh fish and his simple refusal assumes exaggerated significance because cooking and eating fish provides her mental and emotional sustenance. After one of their trips to the seaside, on the way back home, Mr. Sen forces Mrs. Sen to drive and shows no feeling or sympathy for her fears and anxiety about driving. He turns off the radio although she says it helps her concentrate, angrily shouts directions at her and makes her so angry and dejected that she pulls over and swears never to drive again. Although Mr. Sen is not an oppressive husband, he fails to fathom Mrs. Sen’s limitations in seeking a career and her consequent feeling of frustration. He does not appreciate her constant struggle to carve a niche for herself in her private diasporic space despite the loneliness, alienation and marginalization that she suffers.

Driving serves as a complex metaphor in this story. Mrs. Sen does not know how to drive. She is taking driving lessons and hopes to get her driver’s license soon. Learning to drive is of paramount importance because it is also a means of achieving mobility in a space that gives her a feeling of confinement. She desperately hopes that her life will improve once she learns to drive. It is not a means of assimilation or practical convenience for her. It is a means of self-reliance and freedom for her. Though she feels jittery and distracted while driving, she

tries her best to overcome it. Her nervousness while driving even made her English falter: “Everyone, this people, too much in their world” (Lahiri, 1999:121). Her valiant effort to learn driving despite her nervousness underscores her desire for acquiring a sense of self and emancipation in an otherwise constricted space of diaspora.

Banerjee also suggests that immigrant women experience acute alienation once they are out of their homes and in public spaces. They signify their difference and otherness by their appearance. This is vividly delineated in a scene in Lahiri’s story when Mrs. Sen takes a bus home with Eliot after purchasing fresh fish at the fish store on the beach and is regarded with suspicion by a fellow passenger: “On the way home an old woman on the bus kept watching them, her eyes shifting from Mrs. Sen to Eliot to the blood-lined bag between their feet” (Lahiri,1999:132). Before getting off the bus the woman complains to the driver who asks Mrs. Sen if she can speak English. She answers in the affirmative and the driver questions her further about the contents of the bag. He finally says, “The smell seems to be bothering the other passengers. Kid, maybe you should open her window or something” (133). At the fish store, when Mrs. Sen asks the fishmonger not to remove the heads of the fish (the heads of fish are used in the preparation of many Indian delicacies), a woman asks her if she has cats at home, to which she replies, “No cats. Only a husband” (127). Such encounters with racial overtones constantly remind Mrs. Sen that she is an outsider and is marked as such by her appearance, dress and her English with an alien accent. Driving becomes her way to resist the racial stereotyping she is subjected to and rewrite the script for herself.

However, the story ends with one last attempt by Mrs. Sen to drive to the beach without Mr. Sen accompanying her. Before that day, she has never ventured to drive out on the main road without him. The reason for going by herself is his refusal to drive her to the beach for buying fish. Being denied access to this obsession that sustains her, she decides to pluck up courage and drive on her own. It is her final act of resistance against her husband’s patriarchal domination as well as the subtle racism she is subjected to. Though her venture ends in a minor accident, it becomes symbolic of her repeated endeavour to establish for herself an independent and integrated identity within the space of the diaspora.

In the essay, “Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora” Radhakrishnan suggests that Indian identity takes on a “strategic character when it is pruned loose from its nativity” (Radhakrishnan, 1994:123). He argues that the issue then is not just being Indian in “some natural and self-evident way...but ‘cultivating Indianness’ self-consciously for certain reasons; for example, the reason could be that one does not want to lose one’s past or does not want to be homogenized namelessly, or one could desire to combat mainstream racism with a politicized deployment of one’s own ‘difference’”(123-4). Mrs. Sen makes a conscious effort to maintain her Indian identity for all the reasons underscored by Radhakrishnan. Her endeavour involves her various acts of resistance against the intersection of racism, patriarchy, and displacement from all that is familiar and comfortable. The simple acts of resistance constitute her agency and help her articulate her subjectivity in the interstitial space of her diasporic existence.

References

- i. Banerjee, Bidisha.(2004). Ruptured Identities and Resistant Narratives: Mapping a Discourse of the Body in Indian Diasporic Women’s Fiction and Film. University of Iowa, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation.
- ii. Bhaba, Homi.(2006). The Location of Culture. London: Routledge.
- iii. Brah, Avtar.(1997). Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities. New York: Routledge.
- iv. Clifford, James. (1994, August). Diasporas: Toward Ethnographies of the Future. *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3: 302-38.
- v. Ganguly, Keya. (2001). States of Exception: Everyday Life and Postcolonial Identity. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- vi. Hall, Stuart.(1996). Cultural Identity and Diaspora. *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. (Ed.) Padmini Mongia. New York: Arnold, 110-122.
- vii. Lahiri, Jhumpa. (1999). *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.
- viii. Mishra, Vijay. (2007). *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*. London: Routledge.
- ix. Radhakrishnan, Rajagopalan. (1994).Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora. *State of Asian America*. (Ed.) Karin Aguilar-San Juan. Boston, MA: South End Press, 219-33.