

Female Subjects and Negotiating Identities in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

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Abstract: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a collection of short stories mostly concerned with the diasporic postcolonial situation of the lives of Indians and Indian-Americans whose hyphenated Indian identity has led them to be caught between the Indian traditions that they have left behind and a totally different western world that they have to face culminating in an ongoing struggle to adjust between the two worlds of the two cultures. It is this in-between situation of such characters of diasporic identity that makes the collection receptive to postcolonial studies. In its discussion of four of the stories of the collection in which women have a more central role, namely "Mrs. Sen", "This Blessed House", "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "Sexy", the following essay draws on ideas, theories and key words of two major postcolonial theorists, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak whose concerns with postcolonial cultural-identity crisis and cultural hybridity on the one hand and the predicament of female subaltern on the other hand, make them most relevant and beneficial to the concerns of the present study. Through an exclusive attention to female characters, this essay then explores the process of transition and formation of new cultural identities, blatantly engages itself with notions of "hybridity" and "liminality" and examines the way, if any, through which Lahiri gives voice to the subaltern experience. The essay's findings revolve around the fact that by allowing the female subaltern to be voiced, Lahiri's stories prepare a space through which the subaltern can speak. Dealing with the trauma and the possible success, failure or resistance of female subjects who in their confrontations with the culture of the Other negotiate their new identities, this essay presents the problems involved in negotiating such new identities through an exploration of the inevitable Self/Other confrontation which takes place in the process of identity-formation.

Keywords: Diasporic Identity; Self, Other(ing); Hybridity; Liminality; Female subaltern

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INTRODUCTION

Interpreter of Maladies (1999), The 2000 Pulitzer-Prize winning volume of nine short stories, is the first work of Jhumpa Lahiri, the Anglo-American writer of Indian descents. Categorized as an example of the “South Asian American writing” (Srikanth, 1), this book tells of the experience of diaspora and makes the reader acquainted with the complexities and nuances of such an experience. The world that Lahiri portrays in almost all her fiction is set in motion against the cultural tension, anxiety and resultant dialogues that take place when two very different sections of the world – First and Third – in general and Indians and Americans in particular intersect due to a large-scale transnational migration – itself an after-effect of colonialism and globalization respectively. Concerned mostly with the disappointment, failure and at-times success of Indian immigrants in America, Lahiri’s stories in *Interpreter of Maladies* abound with male and female characters who, being displaced, are struggling to survive in the unfamiliar surroundings they are entangled in. One needs to consider though that although most stories are set in The New World, there are still those like “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” which are based in Calcutta. Yet, no matter what the settings are, all these nine stories are united by the common motif of “exclusion, loneliness and the search for fulfillment” (Mandal, 18). It is the presence of such shared motifs and the existence of subtle relations between the stories that, as Brada-Williams suggests, readers tend to read the collection as a “short story cycle” and not simply as a compilation of separate unrelated stories (451).

Widely acknowledged since their publication, Lahiri’s stories have been the centre of attention for both Indian and American critics whose articles have more or less dealt with different aspects of one or more of these stories. The issues discussed in a few number of such available books and articles include a wide range of topics from the stories’ shared motifs and themes by Noelle Brada-Williams; issues concerning the question of hybridity and stereotype in diaspora partially realized in an MA thesis carried out by Phrae Chittiphalangsri; and Debarati Bandyopadhyay’s “Negotiating Borders of culture” which dealing with Lahiri’s fiction in general poses some general questions in the context of postcolonialism; to such an innovative reading of Laura Anh Williams which consider the metaphor of food as a means of asserting subjectivity. It is, therefore, in the context of such works that the present study takes its departure.

Yet, it is worth mentioning that despite the diversity of such topics and concerns, the attention paid to the stories of the collection has not been even. Some like “A Temporary Matter” and “Interpreter of Maladies” – the title story – have been a favorite subject for discussion whereas others like “This Blessed House” or “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” mostly have only been named or merely appreciated without any detailed exploration of the forces which play a great part in creation of the indelible impression left on the readers of such stories. Besides, no specific study has been fully dedicated to a sustained study of the female subjects of the Indian diaspora as presented by Lahiri in her *Interpreter of Maladies*. As Gayatri Gopinath laments in her essay, “the centrality of [male-male or father-son] trope as the primary trope in imagining diaspora invariably displaces and elides female diasporic subjects” (Qtd. in Williams, 70). This manifests itself more when one compares the number of female characters in Lahiri’s work with the number of all-inclusive articles or books written on them.

No wonder, a detailed exploration of all female subjects of this collection is far beyond the scope of a single article and is yet suggested as a possible future scholarly work. This essay, therefore, needs to be selective and thus focuses on those stories whose main plot more directly revolves around the construction of the female rather than the male identity; stories that deal with the suffering, pressure and possible failure or success in the adaptation-process of these female characters in (re-)constructing their subjectivity, (re-)asserting their agency or negotiating their identities through either silence, resistance, negotiation, acculturation or assimilation. The present study then aims at offering a more nuanced interpretation and focused study directed at highlighting the identity-crisis of these often unvoiced and elided diasporic female subjects as portrayed by Jhumpa Lahiri in three of her stories in *Interpreter of Maladies*, namely “Mrs. Sen”, “This Blessed House”, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” and “Sexy”.

Migration, globalization and its aftermath – being an indispensable part of all theories of post-colonialism – makes this study take a postcolonial stand in reading these stories. This essay then draws on some key terms well introduced by the two most influential critics of postcolonial criticism; Homi

K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak whose key critical terms such as “hybridity”, “liminality”, “stereotype”, “mimicry” and “subaltern” are to be briefly discussed in the following section which, setting out some essential guidelines, gives an overview of the theoretical framework upon which the present study is built.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In the postcolonial world, highly marked by globalization, transnational migration has turned into a fact of life. Thus, there are numerous groups of people who traverse across the national borders to reach to their promised land. As Esman relates in his/her study of diasporas, these peoples all of whom share the same homeland, in order to preserve their customs and culture and to recreate the familiar sort of surroundings much associated with their idea of their homeland form communities through which they can hold on to their roots (4). Such diasporas then extend and expand including not only the original immigrants – known as the first generation – but also their posterity – the second generation – “as long as they choose to or are forced to remain a separate community (9). It is possible though, that in the next generations to come and through the continuous process of assimilation, some diasporas melt into the mainstream culture and gradually disappear as a distinct community through time. This process, however, is a very long-lasting slow-moving one and the first and even the second generation of immigrants, those who abound Lahiri’s fiction in general, often have to face up to problems and to be afflicted with scars and traumas to their national, ethnic, cultural, and gender identities.

What needs to be taken into account here is that the notion of identity in general and diasporic identity in particular is not a set, fixed and essential whole but is rather “constructed, fluid and multiple” (Brubaker, 1). According to the recent anti-essential theorizing about subject, and the view that identity is in fact a cultural artifact, “identities are conceived as a process, as performed, and as unstable” (Pratt, 154). Hence, subjects of diasporas are snared in a process of transformation and repositioning of new identities – identities which are always in the process of becoming and transition but never complete. Stuart Hall in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” suggests that we think of identity “as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (222). In the diasporic experience then, “boundaries of the self” (Alexandru, 1) are as fluid as ever and this is when the postcolonial concepts of “hybridity”, “liminality” come to the foreground.

Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (1994) subverts the long-held binary way of thinking about cultural identity in terms of the yawning gap between Self/Other and proposes a hybrid version of identity according to which the Self is present in the Other and vice versa. According to this model, Self and Other are “commingled, interwoven into an indeterminable ‘many-as-one’” (Chittiphalangsri, 1). While “hybrid” identity is being both one and the other through invasion of borderlines, “Liminal” identity is being placed on the very frontiers of Self/Other by taking an “in-between” space or being situated “on the border or the threshold” (Huddart 4). Notions such as “hybridity” and “liminality” seem to be much relevant to the present reading of Lahiri’s stories when one learns that the “liminal” identity is to be found in some “particular (postcolonial) social spaces” (Huddart 5) like the multicultural American society where, due to the constant confrontation of cultural clashes, the Self/Other polarity is constantly threatened; the frontiers are transgressed and people struggle in the process of creating new identities.

This ongoing process of the transgression of boundaries, however, is an ambivalent process which is marked by “fascination and fear, confidence and insecurity, responsibility and guilt” (Booker, 158). It is out of these discordant yet concurrent feelings of appeal and anxiety caused by violation of boundaries that the notions of “stereotype” and “mimicry” are born. While in the realm of Self/Other, “stereotype” can be defined as a negative image projected onto Other by the Self in order to cover up its own frailties, “mimicry” can be read as “a matter of both resemblance and menace” of the Other to the Self used to resist the Othering process (Huddart, 51).

Now, for the sake of this study with its special interest in female subjects, one more postcolonial critic needs to be considered; no one but Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak the one whose notable feminist attention to the Othering process in the plight of post-colonial female subjects and her related notion of the “Subaltern” supplements Bhabha’s “gender-blind” mode of thinking (Bertens 211). Spivak’s notion of the “Subaltern”,

whose voice, she believes, has long been either appropriated or silenced by dominant discourses, includes social identities that are further down the social scale consisting of those like the female postcolonial subject and the new gendered immigrant (Morton, 29). It is this attention to the situation and predicaments of female immigrant as distinct from her male counterpart that makes Spivak's views and concerns particularly relevant to Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

The present study's central focus then is not only on the means by which the female subjects of diaspora in Lahiri's world deal with their subalternity and identity-crisis but also on an exploration of her narrative with the aim of challenging the often-asked Spivakian question of "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Is Lahiri, after all a spokesperson for the Indian subjects of diaspora or does she create a space in which their concerns can be voiced and their stories get told?

"MRS. SEN'S": A LIMINAL SPACE – FROM A CYCLE OF ESCAPE TO ACCEPTANCE

The sixth story of *Interpreter of Maladies* tells the story of Mrs. Sen, the wife of an academic, who looks after Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, after his school time every day. A detailed study of her character proves her to be struggling in the process of adaptation to the new American cultural space. Posited in a liminal space, she has to confront the culture of the Other, and is therefore, on the verge of negotiating a new identity. Although – as a new and enforced immigrant in the United States ("White drumshaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic" ; "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence"[Lahiri, 124; 128]) – Mrs. Sen has taken the very first steps of the adaptation process, she like many other first generation immigrants is still too obsessed with her own cultural background and homeland values that she is too far from being assimilated. Her reaction to the threat to her ethnic identity and the culture of Other is simply an unconscious attempt to take refuge in the past and to avoid the present through as many different means as possible. She, through constant retelling of the stories of her life and relationships "at home" ("At home, you know, we have a driver" or the confession that "Everything is there [Lahiri, 125; 126]), surrounds herself and even others like Eliot by narratives of her past life in order to help herself feel at home within the safety of such narratives.

Her daily activities also are arranged upon the theme of escape. While she prefers delaying her driving practices which are obviously the necessity of her new life, she steadily keeps at her special Indian-cooking daily practices and cooks vigorously despite the fact that there now exists only she and her husband to eat all this food. It is as if her cooking style and her interest in buying and having fish, which have associations with her idea of homeland, are her means of asserting her ethnic identity. Although useful in lubricating the process of change and paving the way towards formation of her future hybrid identity, Mrs. Sen's attachment is also simultaneously blocking the "acculturation" process which Esman defines as "acceptance and adaptation of basic elements of the local culture, its language and its lifestyle" (103). No wonder her broken English of Indian accent ("Is it Beethoven?" she asked once, pronouncing the first part of the composer's name not 'bay,' but 'bee,' like the insect [Lahiri, 130]), is a sign of her initial acceptance of the Other culture, but still there are many elements of her life like sticking to the colorful collection of her now out-of-place saris from her homeland that stay in the way of transition and acceptance.

However, her final act of taking the courage to drive in order to be independent from a seemingly busy patriarchal figure of a husband who is not always there to help can be regarded as a revolutionary act. Mrs. Sen has learnt that in order to survive in her new surroundings, she needs to open up herself to the culture of the Other represented symbolically by the car towards which she initially shows great fear – a fear much associated with the encounter between the Self/Other culture. Her first attempt to cross the boundaries fails but, no matter how traumatic the experience is, it at least makes her face the trauma and possibly release herself from the vicious cycle of escape and avoidance through being more open to the realm of the Other – what is definitely going to prove useful in crafting and negotiating her new diasporic identity and in encouraging her to embrace her new life in America.

“THIS BLESSED HOUSE”: A HYBRID SPACE – SUCCESS OF A SECOND-GENERATION FEMALE IMMIGRANT

“This Blessed House” is the seventh story of Lahiri’s collection placed between “Mrs. Sen” and “The Treatment of Bibi Helder”. What makes such a position noteworthy though is that unlike the other female characters whose experience of the culture of the Other is traumatic, Twinkle, the female protagonist of “This Blessed House” represents second-generation female immigrants who, being submerged by the culture of the Other for rather a long time, have fashioned such hybrid diasporic identities which let them survive and succeed even far above their male counterparts – those male immigrants like Sanjeev.

“This Blessed House” tells the story of a young four-month-old married couple, Sanjeev and his wife Twinkle, who have just moved into a new house and are in the process of “unpacking their boxes” (Lahiri 151). This house moving can itself be allegorically read as a movement into America, which is not after all an empty space but contains within it elements of culture – the here and there Christian artifacts the couple discover upon arrival. Interestingly, fixed in this diasporic situation, these two characters exhibit cultural identities in a state of fluidity and constant transformation. Belonging to different generations of immigrants though, Sanjeev and Twinkle seem to be at different stages of their transformative identities and therefore display “the disconnection between first and second generation immigrants in the United States” (Raman 1). Twinkle’s parents have long lived in California and seemingly, she (belonging with the second-generation immigrants) is simply an American of Indian origin. This very temporal difference and variation in exposure to the culture of the Other makes Twinkle to be an embodiment of hybridity – a stage which is yet to come for the first-generation female immigrants like Mrs. Sen or even for the first-generation male immigrants like Twinkle’s own husband, Sanjeev, who has come to America as a college student and his parents still live in Calcutta. As “a more recent immigrant” then, Sanjeev like Mrs. Sen is a manifestation of liminality and is, therefore, a stage behind Twinkle (Kuortti 208).

As M. A. R. Habib relates, hybridity “expresses a state of ‘in-betweeness’ as in a person who stands between two cultures” (750). This state, however, is by no means an impasse between two cultures but is rather a “productive, exciting, positive force” (Tyson, 423). It is an inclination to welcome multiplicity and to embrace even the conflicting aspects of the blended culture. In “This Blessed House”, celebration of such hybridity is given expression in the person of Twinkle whose cultural assimilation leaves a little room for biased cultural orientation. However, Twinkle’s behavior is beyond mimicry. The reason is that in mimicry, there is a shame hidden in the individual concerning her own culture which, in the case of Twinkle, is totally absent. In fact, not only has she accepted the culture of the Other (reflected in her choice of an Irish poet as her Master’s thesis or her interest in the foreign artifacts), but also “positively negotiates her identity as an American of Indian descent” (Chetty). Upon finding a statue of Christ, she asserts “we’re good little Hindus,” but also leaves “a kiss on top of Christ’s head” (Lahiri, 149). Later, when her guests consider her name as weird, she shows no signs of shame and sorrow. Instead she, who probably has accepted the ridiculous ring to names like hers in an American context (“There is an actress in Bombay named Dimple Kapadia. She even has a sister named Simple” [Lahiri 164]), is able to start a self-derision without being offended or disturbed.

It is this dynamic positive hybridity present in Twinkle that makes her survival definite and gives her a superiority and charm over other female characters whose confrontation with the Other either involves them in cycles of escape or at worst in a total Otherness. However, one needs to remember that more often than not it is only a matter of time and the amount of exposure to the culture of the Other till the hybrid identity of those like Twinkle is formed. In other words, there is still time and hope of survival for those like Sanjeev and Mrs. Sen to pass through the threshold of liminality into the hybrid space. Twinkle’s success in negotiating a hybrid identity is the hopeful future for all those whose present experience of the culture of Other is that of threat and confusion. Openness is to come and hybridity, the appealing yet disconcerting gift of the diasporic experience, awaits immigrants whose identities is always in the process of becoming

“THE TREATMENT OF BIBI HALDAR”: SUBALTERN’S RESISTANCE TO THE OTHERING PROCESS

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, the penultimate story of Lahiri’s collection is one of its two stories which are set in India. Its theme, however, has much in common with the other stories of the plight and anxiety of the female subaltern as it follows the aftermaths of the globalization process in the life of a native Indian woman who is a victim of both destitution and homelessness. Bibi Haldar is a woman living in India, in her own homeland, but is more or less exposed to the Othering process. Interestingly enough, “The treatment of Bibi Haldar” and “Mrs. Sen” have two shared points: firstly, both women are thirtyish. Secondly, Bibi Haldar’s neighbors are replications of those Indian neighbors who Mrs. Sen had longed for in America: “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” (Lahiri, 128).

Interestingly then, Bibi’s neighbours, a group of philanthropic caring Indian housewives of the same building where Bibi is living as a marginalized sick inhabitant, are much more eager than her own so-called relatives to offer help. Bibi has long suffered from a strange unknown ailment, and while numerous possible treatments have been suggested, none has proved to be useful. Bibi longs for a normal life in which she can have a husband and bear children. Despite Bibi’s male cousin’s lack of interest in such a topic, female neighbors do all they can to help her on the way to normalcy. Yet, their attempt fails as nobody agrees to take the sick Bibi Haldar as a wife. The twist though comes at the end of the story when Bibi, who has led a life of solitude and isolation on the roof of the building, gets pregnant and, giving birth to a son, is finally yet curiously cured.

Reading the story in the light of female identity-formation process, one can come up with the view that “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” can be in fact read as a commentary on the constructedness of the Indian notion of femininity and its possible burden on the life of the marginalized female subaltern in Calcutta, India. While Mrs. Sen lives in America and the threats to her identity are coming from the Other culture of her host land, Bibi Haldar’s identity which is at odds with the culturally-constructed gender codes of her society is threatened by the Other cultural codes of her home land. The process of Othering takes places everywhere and at all times; identities, therefore, are always in the process of being made and remade. Bibi’s Otherness to the culture she has been shaped in, is emphasized from the very beginning of the story in the guise of her allegorical mental disease – a disease which becomes the source of her being Othered as it “confined her world to the unpainted four-story building” (Lahiri, 173). The source of this disease then, seems to be nothing but a departure from an adherence to the ethnic cultural codes. Anyone not clinging to these codes is doomed to Otherness – even in her own homeland. Bibi’s disease is the result of her breaking of such codes both by her physical look; “She was not pretty. Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke” (Lahiri, 174), and the things she could not do; “Bibi had never been taught to be a woman” (Lahiri, 178).

Bibi’s identity-crisis comes to surface when she wants to negotiate a new identity by embracing these gender codes of the Other. Despite the feminist community solidarity, this seems to be an impossible act as fitting into the ethnic cultural codes needs certain essential characteristics which are missing in Bibi. So that, all her attempts to embrace such codes result in acts of mimicry when in order to practice, she is urged by the other women “to engage in small conversations with nearby men” (Lahiri, 180). In such practices what is after all parodied and ridiculed is the very definition of the Self (The Self of Bibi’s Community). This, however seemingly opens the way for formation of the final “hybrid” identity of Bibi Haldar which soon leads to the treatment of her disease. Bibi, through negotiating between the Self and Other, becomes a mother without being a wife – a half-sate of both this and that. It is this hybrid nature of Bibi Haldar’s identity whose subversive dimension arms Spivak’s subaltern with an act of resistance – an act that melts the boundaries of Self/Other and initiates an act of negotiation between both.

“SEXY”: A FAILED POSSIBILITY – EMBRACING THE OTHER IS A RECIPROCAL ACT

Sexy, taking a mid position among all other stories, can be considered as the most thematically different and yet significant story of Lahiri's collection based on the fact that unlike other stories its protagonist is an American rather than an Indian female. What then makes this story relevant to the present study is that together with the other two stories – which dealt with the trauma of the identity-crisis in the lives of Mrs. Sen, a female Indian immigrant in America, and Bibi Halder, a marginalized subaltern female of Indian Origins in Calcutta – the story of Miranda, a female American in Boston, can provide a structural balance. The story seems to suggest that in the diasporic identity-crisis process which occurs as a direct result of the clash of two very different cultures, it is not always the immigrant Other who is victimized but also the native Self can fall prey to the process of Othering.

Sexy tells the story of a young woman, Miranda, who gets involved in an affair with a married Indian man named Dev. As threatening as the confrontation between the native Self and the immigrant Other can be, there is always an appeal and mutual attraction in between. This double sense of charm and menace is overtly dramatized in the sexual appeal that exists between Miranda, the American female protagonist, and Dev, the Indian male protagonist of the story. As portrayed in Miranda's fascination with Indian culture upon meeting Dev, native Self covertly takes an interest in knowing and locating the immigrant Other. Miranda, who in the beginning of the story knows quite a little about the Other Indian culture, is soon intrigued by the thrill of exploring the Other – a sense of thrill which causes her to visit an Indian grocery or go to an Indian restaurant or to try, in any possible way, to learn more about India and Indian culture. This Self/Other confrontation then posits Miranda's identity on the verge of an open-ness to the Other. Thus, she takes the first steps towards negotiating an ideal relationship of Self/Other in which no narcissistic attempt of the Self is involved in creation of the Other – What Spivak calls an “ethical responsibility.” According to Spivak, “ethics are not just a problem of knowledge but a call to a relationship” (Landry, 5).

This call for a healthy Self/Other relationship, however, fails for the very reason that the response of the immigrant Other is not as open as the native Self. According to Spivak, the ideal relationship is the one which “engages the Other in non-essential, non-crisis terms” but is also reciprocal and so requires the same very act of opening up from the Other (Kilburn 3). Dev in “Sexy” has a misplaced stereotypical view of Miranda as a exotic woman of high sexual appeal all through the story. Thus, he cannot take part in creating “the ethical stance of making discursive room for the Other to exist” (Landry, 6). So that the one single attempt on the part of the female subject is unanswered, silenced and doomed to fail.

CONCLUSION

It is now time to return to the question and aim proposed in the beginning of this essay and to examine the findings in order to answer the principal question of how the female subject and her identity-crisis is portrayed in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*. This proposed question, though, seems to be faulty and out of place now as there is no one *single* way of representing the diasporic trauma involved in negotiating female identities either as female immigrants or female natives. Each individual, from Mrs. Sen to Miranda has their own means of survival; one resists while the other accepts; one acculturates whereas the other escapes. No doubt, all such reactions are due to the existence of negotiable identities which are always in the process of becoming and changing. Female characters of Lahiri's fiction negotiate their new unstable identities through their own different means and their own individual voice. What matters most from a Spivakian viewpoint is that such stories and voices are not appropriated and homogenized but are treated as distinct and particular.

Gayatri Spivak, the Indian-American critic, in “A Literary Representation of the Subaltern” suggests literary texts as “an alternative rhetorical site for articulating the histories of Subaltern women” whose stories have been untold and whose voice have gone unheard (Morton 33). This has apparently turned out to be the great mission of Jhumpa Lahiri, a writer of her next generation, to create such an alternative site.

Lahiri in *Interpreter of Maladies*, not only does not appropriate the voice of the female subjects each of whom lead lives that have been touched by the globalization process, but also creates the ideal fictional space in which the subaltern can speak – a wish fulfilled and a dream coming true once more in the work of fiction.

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