

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Living in a House with One's Home in the Heart: An Exploration of the Issues of Identity, Belonging and Becoming in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs. Sen's*

Debottama Roy

M.Phil, English, Assistant Teacher, English, Higher Secondary, Kamala Chatterjee School for Girls,
Kolkata
debottama_roy@rediffmail.com



ABSTRACT

More than a physical space, 'home' is a psychological and emotional construct, related to a person's sense of being. While 'loss of home' or wilful departure from it is a painful experience for each individual, it is particularly poignant for the diaspora, on account of both a physical and emotional displacement. Through an exploration of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs. Sen's*, this article attempts to study the way in which a 'sense of homelessness' is detrimental to the idea of selfhood and the way in which the displaced migrant has the potential to reinvent and refashion herself in an attempt to create a new home, identity and sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS: diaspora, home, identity, self, refashioning, homeland, migrant, belonging

'Home is where the heart is', thus goes a famous proverb, significantly highlighting that transcending the limits of mere physical constraining boundaries, the idea of 'home' is more of an emotional, psychological reality. On account of several historical and social processes, the emotional and spatial sanctity of home does not remain inviolable. Displacement of large numbers of individuals due to forced indentured labour, slavery and spontaneous migration owing to better opportunities, is the reality of the present world. The partition of India into India and Pakistan and later Bangladesh was responsible for a complex and deep kind of displacement, both emotional and psychological, where a person's home and place of birth were in conflict with her country of citizenship. The perfect instance is the character of Thamma in 'The Shadow Lines' by Amitav Ghosh. Thamma, a native of present day Bangladesh by origin, has supported the struggle for independence with her entirety and believes in the absoluteness of borders drawn in blood. Yet, in day to day conversation, she

confuses between 'coming home' and 'going home', and can never quite fathom how her land of birth came to be so much at odds with her 'sense of home'. The idea of 'home' is profoundly and intrinsically related to inner peace, a sense of belonging, identity and rootedness in the world. This is true for all human beings. However, this is more so for the people of the diaspora who have suffered a physical and an emotional displacement. 'Home', with all its connotations acquires special significance in an alien land where one has to re-discover and regenerate oneself. A study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *Mrs. Sen's* will reveal how a persona in exile tries to achieve selfhood via a path that is agonizing yet enriching. The story is a poignant revelation of the life of a yet not socially integrated migrant.

It is necessary to have an acquaintance with the basic storyline in order to proceed. Hailing from the bustling city of Calcutta, Mrs Sen is brought by her husband to a quiet American town by the sea, where she has not yet made any friends. The story traces her journey to make some meaning of her

life, to belong, with Eliot by her side, whom she babysits. Her journey is contrary to a joyride, where she goes about her daily chores with a sense of alienation and helplessness and succumbs to depression at times; at other times she is enthusiastic and jolly. Her journey is depicted in a humane manner, and although the story ends on a note of negativity, the implication is that this process of finding oneself is a continuum.

To make sense of Mrs Sen's life one must empathize with her sense of exile, a state that is an initial part of all diasporic experiences. Translated into a different culture altogether, she feels friendless and out of place with her habits and her wardrobe full of pretty saris. As John McLeod points out: *"Migrants tend to arrive in new places with baggage; both in the physical sense of possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values. This can have consequences for the ways in which others may or may not make migrants feel 'at home' on arrival in a new place.... Although migrants may pass through the **political** borders of nations, crossing their frontiers and gaining entrance to new places, such 'norms and limits' can be used to exclude migrants from being accommodated inside the **imaginative** borders of the nation."*¹ As with all processes of translation, not all is lost in the migrant's agonizing process of integration. As Homi Bhabha argues in *The Location of Culture*, borders are highly fertile zones and the people negotiating these zones are equipped with the new 'art of the present'. As McLeod writes about Bhabha's essay, *"For Bhabha, the border is the place where conventional patterns of thought are disturbed and can be disrupted by the possibility of crossing. At the border, past and present, inside and outside no longer remain separated as binary opposites but instead commingle and conflict.... These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain of elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity."*² For Bhabha, identity and subjectivity are products of discourse, and hence open to 'articulation' and 'elaboration'. In other words, identities are not essentialized or fixed, thereby allowing the migrant to refashion herself. These hybrid identities are

never closed or complete, always remaining in perpetual motion and open to change and regeneration.

It is this regenerative selfhood of Mrs Sen that is the essence of this story. And this struggle for identity and selfhood is played out in the confusions of the physical structure that is Mrs Sen's house and her 'sense of home'. While talking about the ways in which 'home' is imagined in diaspora communities, McLeod writes, *"The concept of 'home' often performs an important function in our lives. It can act as a valuable means of orientation by giving us a sense of our place in the world. It tells us where we originated from and where we belong. As an ideal it stands for shelter, stability, security and comfort.... To be 'at home' is to occupy a location where we are welcome, where we can be with people very much like ourselves."*³ For people of the diaspora, especially when they first arrive at the foreign land of their destination, it is a challenge for them to think of it as their home. An old photograph of his childhood house in Bombay tells Salman Rushdie in his essay 'Imaginary Homelands': *"It's my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time."*⁴ 'Home' has emotional and psychological connotations which the migrant tries to create with the help of her fragmentary memories. In Lahiri's story, Mrs Sen tries to do precisely this. As Eliot comes to understand with time, when Mrs Sen refers to 'home', she implies the one back in India and not the comfortable flat that she occupies with Mr. Sen in the U.S. However, her struggle to make a home of the flat is apparent in the advertisement she publishes expressing her desire to babysit: *"Professor's wife responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home."*⁵ She tries to make her very own niche and as Eliot is aware, the flat the Sens occupy has its own set of rules and is an exotic other land for Eliot. In the flat, *"Mismatched remnants of other carpets were positioned in front of the sofa and chairs, like individual welcome mats anticipating where a person's feet would contact the floor. White drum-shaped lampshades flanking the sofa were still wrapped in the manufacturer's plastic.... Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Sen wore shoes; Eliot noticed several pairs lined on the shelves of a small bookcase by the front*

door. They wore flip-flops.”⁶ Right from the first day, Eliot is aware of the otherness of the Sens. The lampshades still wrapped in manufacturer’s plastic are significant in two ways. Firstly, they reflect the typically Indian Bengali habit of letting new things lie in original packing so as they remain unspoiled. Secondly, this may also imply that Mrs. Sen lacks the motivation and interest to immerse herself fully in the forced ‘home’ that she is trying to create. However, that Mrs Sen is successful in stamping the place with her identity is apparent. When Eliot’s mother brings him to Mrs. Sen for the first time, Mrs. Sen is in a ‘shimmering white sari patterned with orange paisleys’ that looks exotic and is unsuitable for the weather. “Yet it was his mother, Eliot had thought, in her cuffed, beige shorts and her rope-soled shoes, who looked odd... and in that room where all things were so carefully covered, her shaved knees and thighs too exposed.”⁷ In the process of the transition of this house to home, Mrs. Sen’s days are filled with agonizing moments of recollection, of fragments from her past life in India. As she cuts vegetables each day on a special kind of Indian blade, known as *boti* in Bengali, Mrs. Sen reminisces to Eliot, how the night before a function at her house, all the women of the locality used to come and chat and cut vegetables on the roof of their house all night long. Being a Bengali myself, I can safely say, that even 30-40 years back, this nightlong cutting of vegetables would be extremely unlikely, if not impossible. Expressing her sense of excruciating loneliness, Mrs. Sen tells Eliot: “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 neighbourhood and half of another has come to share the news, to help with arrangements.”⁸ This is exaggeration to say the least but when it comes to the diasporic condition, exaggeration has an underlying significance. Very interestingly, Rushdie notes, owing to the fragmentary nature of memories and the imperfect condition of the human lot, reminiscences are never fully ‘accurate’. He writes about migrants’ recollections: “It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back... But if we do look

back, we must do so in the knowledge... that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.”⁹ These Indias of the mind are born out of demanding situations, real situations. They fulfil a need by providing the migrant with a sense of rootedness in her life, at a point when she is adrift. Exaggeration, in this context, in Mrs Sen’s memories of homeland, heightens her sense of exile, focusing on her mental yearning.

Mrs Sen’s struggle of finding her self is no less than heroic. At times she is restless; happy and sad at the same time. This happens when she receives a letter from her near ones in India, informing her of some important event. When she hears of her sister’s new baby she is elated but is also deeply sad when she thinks that she, the baby’s own aunt, will remain a stranger. At other times she is deeply depressed, ignoring her chores and barely talking to Eliot. However, she never thinks of giving up. She fights the negative vibes she feels as she tries to find a foothold. The success of both her natural charm and her efforts is evident in the way she impacts Eliot. Eliot’s is the persona through which Mrs Sen’s impressions on her new land are registered. Eliot is only eleven years old, and that he is still childlike is borne out by the following words: “The year before he was looked after by a university student named Abby, a slim, freckled girl who read books without pictures on their covers....”¹⁰ It is noteworthy that only a year back Eliot had looked for books with interesting pictures on their covers. Coming from divorced parents and living in a desolate neighbourhood by the seaside, while his mother is away for almost the entire day, it is not surprising that Eliot forms a bond with Mrs Sen. He seems to like the warmth and cosiness of the Sens’ apartment, which is in stark contrast to his cold, windswept house. Just like Mrs Sen, he suffers loneliness, albeit his is the loneliness that is taken for granted in the American way of life. Mrs Sen provides him with the companionship that he lacks; she showers him with love and care. According to Bhabha, the border is a place of infinite possibility

and new ideas. He views the migrant, who is standing at the border, as an agent of change. McLeod writes, *"Standing at the border, the migrant is empowered to intervene actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or 'tradition' (of both the home and host land) rather than passively accept its venerable customs and pedagogical wisdom. He or she can question, refashion or mobilise received ideas. The migrant is empowered to act as an agent of change, deploying received knowledge in the present and transforming it as a consequence...inherited knowledge can be reinscribed and given new, unexpected meanings. Bhabha calls this action 'restaging the past'."*¹¹ Mrs Sen does precisely this. She brings with her to the new land, Indian family values and ways, and while changing herself to suit the demands of the new country, she succeeds in changing Eliot as well, transforming his expectations, making him ponder upon certain experiences he has had in his very American life. When Mrs Sen tells him that back in India, one had to just speak loudly in order for the neighbours to come rushing by, Eliot remembers the time when a young couple who lived nearby had a party to which they were not invited. When the dancing started in the evening, his mother called to tell them to keep the music down. Eliot is deprived, thus, of the fuzzy warmth and longing that Mrs Sen feels when she thinks of her neighbours. He would probably not have thought of the haunting emptiness of this experience if not for Mrs Sen. Mrs Sen fills his vacant life with her time, her love and her care. Everyday Eliot comes 'home' to Mrs Sen and she is always there to receive him as the bus drops him off. He accompanies Mrs. Sen as she practises driving each day. Mrs Sen prepares tasty snacks for him and knows how to engage him so that he is not bored. Witnessing Mrs Sen's preparations for lunch and dinner, for just her husband and herself, Eliot remembers the pizza his mother usually orders at home for dinner and also her attempts at half-hearted conversations. Hailing from a broken family, Eliot has not known the sense of security and happiness that comes with a family. He gets a taste of this in the company of Mr and Mrs. Sen. He goes out with them sometimes to buy fish or to simply drive around with them. Once when

Mr. Sen wanted to take his wife out, Eliot was included and very welcome. The day was a sunny one, to the brim with contentment, as the three of them clicked pictures and ate crab cakes at the sunny beach. It is therefore little wonder that when his mother decides he is old enough to remain at home without a babysitter, and stops sending him to Mrs Sen he is desolate: *"The first day, just as he was taking off his coat, the phone rang. It was his mother calling from her office. 'You're a big boy now, Eliot,' she told him. 'You okay?' Eliot looked out the kitchen window, at gray waves receding from the shore, and said that he was fine."*¹² Eliot is forced to take on the responsibility of being a big boy although he is not ready yet. In India, it would be unimaginable to leave an eleven year old boy unattended at home. He misses whatever Mrs Sen represented and had to offer. There is a certain validation here of the Other attitudes and ways of life that Mrs Sen has brought with her. She leaves a marked impact on Eliot's life.

As a migrant begins to adapt to a changed life and country, she is reluctant to let go traits that define her as who she is. Mrs Sen's obsession with fish is a case to the point. There is, again, a certain degree of exaggeration when she describes the Bengalis' love for fish: *"She added that in Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky."*¹³ Whatever else they might do, Bengalis definitely did not eat fish first thing in the morning. They usually eat other kinds of things for breakfast. As pointed out earlier, exaggeration serves a purpose: here it reveals the way the eating of fish is connected to her soul, a passion in an alien land that binds her to her roots. It acts as a bridge to her past; in her mind it is one of the things that she can avail in a foreign land that makes her a quintessential Bengali. Procuring fresh fish from the shop at the beach, quite a few miles from her home, becomes an obsession with her. Ironically, it is this 'fishy' business that gives her an identity for the first time in her new home. As she is a regular customer looking for a whole fish, the man who ran the fish market called her one day, assuming she wanted the fish that had come in and said that he would hold it for her. She was elated. Lahiri writes: *"She was*

flattered. "Isn't that nice of him, Eliot? The man said he looked up my name in the telephone book."¹⁴ She is recognized as an entity for the first time socially. When she buys fish, she has the opportunity of socially interacting with the man behind the counter. She is in charge, giving him directions to clean the fish, to leave on the head or what to do with the tail. However, to visit the fish market, she requires the help of her husband, because she cannot drive. This is the most important quality that she must master in order to make this country home, but she is very scared. Not any degree of persuasion on her husband's part can make her drive on the main road. Driving seems to go against her very nature, to everything that her life in Calcutta demanded.

However, as discussed earlier, life on the margins, of the migrant at the border is open to change. As Bhabha has elucidated, identity is a discursive product and can be remodelled in novel and creative ways. This story is about how Mrs Sen refashions herself, although unknowingly and reluctantly. Paradoxically, it is the new compulsion of driving that is necessary to remain connected to her roots in the terms of acquiring fish. Nevertheless, she tries to put it off for as long as possible. When Mr. Sen finds it difficult to drive her to the fish market when she pleases, she takes Eliot to the market by the local bus, thus taking the first step towards independence. She is on her own in a new place and also has Eliot to care for, but she manages just fine. It is with the objective of acquiring some tasty halibut and finding no other option, that Mrs Sen decides to drive. She tries to overcome her fear but meets with a minor accident with Eliot by her side. That is the last day that Eliot spends with Mrs. Sen. Before leaving, he hears Mrs Sen crying behind the closed bedroom door.

It is on this seeming note of pessimism that the novel ends. But what the reader must not focus on is Mrs Sen's initial failure to drive. Rather, the focus should be on her efforts to overcome the challenges of her completely different surroundings and her success, even if limited. As Rushdie says, we are 'wounded creatures', all of us. The stoicism and heroism is in Mrs Sen's proactive attempt to take charge of her daily life. In fact, her decision to

babysit a white American child is in itself commendable. The conclusion of the story should be construed not as the failure but as the beginning of Mrs Sen's long and arduous journey of creating her own selfhood. In the words of Rushdie about the lives of the diaspora: "*Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not infertile territory for a writer to occupy.*"¹⁵ This quotation throws light upon the peculiar, in-between condition of all migrants. And although Rushdie particularly points out that it is not a bad place for writers to be, I wish to expand this to say it is a fertile place, not without a lot of potential, for all migrants. For when people head to their graves, it is only their experience and wisdom that they are armed with. If not anything else, the diasporic condition provides a wealth of myriad experiences, which an individual can use to fashion and refashion herself, a thousand times over.

Notes and References

1. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 1st Indian ed. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2010. 211-212. Print.
2. *Ibid.* 217-218.
3. *Ibid.* 210.
4. Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991. 9. Print.
5. Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Mrs Sen's". *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India Pvt Ltd, 2000. 111. Print.
6. *Ibid.* 112.
7. *Ibid.* 112-113.
8. *Ibid.* 116.
9. Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991.10. Print.
10. Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Mrs Sen's". *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India Pvt Ltd, 2000. 111. Print.

11. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. 1st Indian ed. New Delhi: Viva Books Private Limited, 2010. 218-219. Print.
12. Lahiri, Jhumpa. "Mrs Sen's". *Interpreter of Maladies: Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India Pvt Ltd, 2000. 135. Print.
13. Ibid. 123.
14. Ibid. 124.
15. Rushdie, Salman. *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books in association with Penguin Books, 1991.15. Print.