



A Study On Immigrant Experiences Of Mrs. Sen And Ashima Ganguly In Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter Of Maladies And The Namesake

V. Aparna Sri^a, Dr. S. Akash^b

^a *Research Scholar in English, M.R Government Arts College, Mannargudi. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli).*

^b *Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor of English, M.R Government Arts College, Mannargudi. (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli)*

APA Citation:

Aparna Sri, V., & Akash, S. (2021). A study on Immigrant experiences of Mrs. Sen and Ashima Ganguly in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies and The Namesake*, *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 17(4), 3235-3242.

Submission Date: 11/10/2021

Acceptance Date: 25/12/2021

Abstract

Lahiri sets her books between Bengal and America. She connects her ties to her motherland through her works. Being a diasporic writer, she works on the themes such as identity crisis, rootlessness, nostalgia, alienation and frustration. The diaspora finds adapting to the new land difficult, especially during their early migration days. Women who migrate to America after marriage find themselves doubly isolated in their newly adopted country. They feel alienated and isolated, missing their home. This paper studies Jhumpa Lahiri's Mrs Sen in *Interpreter of Maladies* and Ashima Ganguly in *The Namesake*, who struggle to adapt to America.

Keywords: Jhumpa Lahiri, Mrs Sen, Ashima, Food as cultural signifier and nostalgia.

1. Introduction

Diaspora is "the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions." (Ashcroft) The diaspora finds adapting to the new land difficult, especially during their early migration days. Women who migrate to America after marriage find themselves doubly isolated in their newly adopted country. They feel alienated and isolated, missing their home. This paper studies Jhumpa Lahiri's Mrs Sen, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Ashima Ganguly, in *The Namesake*, who struggle to adapt to America.

Mrs Sen's husband is a University Professor. She is a caretaker for an eleven-year-old boy Eliot. Lahiri narrates this story from Eliot's point of view, who acts as an observer of a Traditional Indian woman. However, Eliot finds Mrs Sen more attractive than his mother. Earlier, Eliot was taken care of by a university student named Abbey. Abbey refused to cook non-veg for Eliot, and she stopped coming after receiving her degree as she moved to another university to pursue her higher studies. Mrs Linden, an old woman, took care of Eliot for a while. She was quite compassionate with Eliot. The moment Eliot came home, she greeted him and worked on her crosswords while Eliot played on his own. She gives him coffee from her thermos every afternoon. However, one day, Eliot's mother discovers that the coffee contains more whiskey than coffee, so she is sent off from her house. After

this, Mrs Sen approaches Eliot's mother through an index card, saying, "Professor's wife, responsible and kind, I will care for your child in my home." However, Eliot's mother insisted that an adult should stay at home only to help Eliot in an emergency. Since Mrs Sen does not know to drive, Eliot's mother agreed to leave Eliot at Mrs Sen's house. Eliot notices Mrs Sen's house and their mannerisms from day one. He notices that Mr and Mrs Sen wore only flip-flops inside their house. Their slippers were neatly arranged in a rack. They started the conversation with a formal talk by introducing Mr Sen as a mathematics professor at the University. Eliot observes Mrs Sen as follows: "She was about thirty. She had a small gap between her teeth and faded pockmarks on her chin, yet her eyes were beautiful, with thick, flaring brows and liquid flourishes extending beyond the lids' natural width. 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." (IOM 112).

With all these observations, he found Mrs Sen more adorable than his mother, who looked odd with her cropped hair, beige shorts and rope-soled shoes. When Mrs Sen offered her biscuits and other things, she refused to eat anything. Eliot's mother was hesitant to leave him in this house. She is quite apprehensive seeing their Indianness. Mrs Sen's caring attitude seems weird for an American woman who leads a less compassionate life. For Mrs Sen, "Everything is there" (IOM 113). 'There' represents India. Eliot realises that for Mrs Sen everything is India. Eliot goes to Mrs Sen after his school. He learns to leave his sneakers outside in the shoe rack. Eliot grasps their Indianness in Mrs Sen's house. Eliot feels comfortable with Mrs Sen. He enjoys watching her chopping vegetables and fish. Mrs Sen tells stories of her life in Calcutta. She uses a special vegetable cutting blade that she has taken along with her from her native. Eliot sees it as the "prow of a Viking ship, sailing to battle in distant seas." (IOM 114).

The presence of blade is used as an object for the immigrant, which acts as a tool that bridges the gap between the immigrant and the homeland. Thus the "dominating power of the object creates a restlessness in the human mind." (Nagarani 100). While chopping, she always had an eye on Eliot. Eliot notices that she had an eye on him and the television but not on the blade. She says that she had brought this blade from India, and each household had at least one such blade. Whenever there was a function in their house, her mother would send a word to the neighbourhood ladies for help. They all sit in an enormous circle and chop vegetables, laughing and gossiping. However, here, she finds it difficult to sleep in this silence.

For Mrs Sen, her home is always India, not the apartment where she lives in America. She longs for her people and community living. She asks Eliot if someone will come if she shouts at the top of her voice. She says, "at home", one had to raise one's voice. Mrs Sen expresses her Indianness in many ways. Eliot said, "they might call you...but they might complain that you were making too much noise." (IOM 117). These objects remind Rushdie's Imaginary Homelands as that takes one to the past with a sense of nostalgia.

With all these objects like the blade and kitchen, Mrs Sen's narrative is "not through writing but through the food she prepares, cooks, serves and eats. This is the space she calls her own. Here she gains agency and asserts her own. On an emotional and psychological level, she connects with her maternal ancestors and her cultural traditions even as she alters, modifies or adds to their narrative." (Maimi 159).

Earlier her mother called up a crowd and asked them to keep their noise down. At home, when Eliot was with his mother, she used to order something for their dinner but did not make anything

special for just two people. Eliot notices that it is Mrs Sen's daily practice to chop vegetables and clean them up and fill the countertops with chopped vegetables and rightly measured paste of ingredients to add to the dish. "it was never a special occasion, nor was she ever expecting company. It was merely dinner for herself and Mr Sen, as indicated by the two plates and two glasses she set, without napkins or silverware, on the square Formica table at one end of the living room." (IOM 117) She came to receive Eliot at the bus stop. Eliot sensed that she had kept waiting for him for quite a long time. She always packs something for Eliot to eat something on the way back home. Sometimes it may be oranges or shelled peanuts. She practised driving half-heartedly. She did not show much interest in driving. Eliot encouraged her, saying that if she learned to drive, she could go alone and explore many things.

Eliot learned that two things made Mrs Sen very happy. One is aerogrammes from Calcutta, and the other is fresh fish from the seaside. She complains that the fish is not fresh and does not taste like the fresh fish in India. For her, fish is the ultimate food. She tells Eliot's mother that she grew up eating fish twice daily. In Calcutta, people ate fish in the morning and for dinner, sometimes they ate it as a snack after school in the evening. Mrs Sen finds a supermarket on the beach side several miles away from her house. She seems to be very lively and animated in the fish store. She buys fish and inspects it with all her love. She "stroked the tails and prodded the bellies." (IOM 159). For her, fish symbolises everything: her home, friends, neighbours and family. Hence for Mrs Sen cooking is not just an activity or a daily routine. "it becomes a sensual experience, an emotionally charged activity as eating food is for some people." (Maimi 159). Mrs Sen also likes to serve people.

The first thing she does when Eliot's mother is home, Mrs Sen offers her something to eat and drink, but Eliot's mother is not usually heartened by her servings and just takes a sip or a bite. She confesses once to Eliot that she does not like the taste. Sarah Sceats suggests that "Eliot's mother's rejection of Mrs Sen's food is a rejection of Mrs Sen's being. However, this is not just a case of petulance or being overly sensitive about any critique of her cooking. It is important to see this within the context of Mrs Sen's minority status as a cultural outsider in American society." (qt in. Maimi 160). There are other objects Lahiri has mentioned that exuberate the nostalgia in Mrs Sen. Mrs Sen's colourful saris from Calcutta. She has collections of saris of "every imaginable texture and shade, brocaded with gold and silver threads. Some were transparent, tissue-thin, others as thick as drapes, with tassels knotted along edges" (IOM 125). The other object is a cassette recording her family members' voices. She plays the cassette to Eliot and explains it to him.

"My third uncle, my cousin, my father, my grandfather. One speaker sang a song. Another recited a poem. The final voice on the tape belonged to Mrs Sen's mother. It was quieter and sounded more serious than the others. There was a pause between each sentence, and during this pause, Mrs. Sen translated for Eliot: "The price of goat rose two rupees. The mangoes at the market are not very sweet. College street is flooded." (IOM 128).

Mrs Sen sticks to these material objects as they act as a bridge between her and her homeland. She feels at home whenever she sees those objects, especially fish, her vermilion on her forehead, her Saris, vegetable cutting blade and cassettes.

Hence Lahiri projects food and cooking as a cultural signifier which relates home, memory and identity of a person. Mrs Sen, an unwilling immigrant, finds solace in all these objects and cooking and eating. These objects transcend boundary and thus acts as a cultural signifier.

Lahiri depicts Mrs Sen as an immigrant who is very reluctant to adopt in the country. She says to Eliot, her sister has a small baby girl. “by the time I see her, depending if Mr. Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. Her aunt will be a stranger if we sit side by side on a train, she will not know my face.” (IOM 122) Mrs. Sen asks Eliot whether he misses his mother during the days he spends with Mrs Sen, but Eliot does not mind his mother. The thought of love and care does not occur to him regarding family. He even says he would leave his mother in a home after his marriage and visit her often.

Mrs Sen’s family asks her to send pictures. She sat there exhausted, expressing her dismay that “they think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace.” (IOM 125). One day Mr Sen took Mrs Sen and Eliot to the beachside to spend some time there. They bought two baskets of clam cakes. Mrs Sen put a good deal of Tabasco sauce and black peppers on hers. “Like Pakoras. No?” (IOM 129)

The novel *The Namesake* has many references to Bengali Indian foods as they have a psychological impact on the people of the Indian Diaspora. Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli cherish their Bengali food as it is a source of their familial happiness and comfort because it connects them with their past, but for second-generation immigrants such as Gogol and Sonia, it is a constant source of shame and embarrassment. *The Namesake* portrays the differences between growing up in two different cultures and the American myth of self-creation. She pictures diasporic culture with elaborate explanations of name and naming traditions in Bengali culture. It highlights various aspects of diaspora and includes some of the grand cliches of diasporic literature, such as the immigrant’s sense of in-betweenness, rootlessness, and utmost desire to fit in the new social set-up. Music, mother tongue, clothes, art and rituals, and food are the prime components of an immigrant’s life because they work as strategies to cope in the absence of home by reconstructing a fantasised new homeland.

Food and diaspora have a strong relationship because food is not merely a biological need required for sustenance. After all, it is strongly associated with the diaspora’s ancestral roots, religion, region and folk tradition. It may be used as a mark of class, social aspiration and personal relationship besides defining our language, culture, and ideology. The images of spicy Indian food and its aroma greatly serve as a cultural signifier. It brings their family closer and also it connects them with their past. It gives temporary comfort to the immigrants living abroad. The author sketches how Ashima keeps herself busy with cooking as it helps her to survive in an alien and hostile new environment. At the beginning of the novel, the pregnant and isolated Ashima is shown making a spicy Indian snack-Jhalmuri using American ingredients: “Rice crispies and planters peanuts and chopped red onion in a bowl. She adds salt, lemon juice, thin slices of green chilli pepper, wishing there was mustard oil to pour into the mix” (NS 1). The absence of mustard oil reminds her of Calcutta, where it is easy to find. This amalgamation of cultures, people and races give rise to multiculturalism. Like Mrs Sen, Ashima is all alone at home once Ashoke leaves to work; hence her only solace is cooking. She prepares her food with all her favourite spices and feels at home. According to Ashima, in America, everything is foreign. Hence her rice crispies make her feel at home and bring her closer to her family in Calcutta. Cooking provides happiness, comfort and solace to immigrant women like Ashima.

Similarly, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli try to adjust to the socio-cultural model of the United States. They know that it is hard to ignore the past; hence, to retain those happy memories, they reinvent them in their presence by listening to Bengali Music, Rabindra Sangeet reading Bengali literature, wearing traditional Indian dresses and cooking their delicious Bengali recipes. Ashima

misses her family in Calcutta and hence always keeps herself engaged in food preparation of various sorts just to minimise her sense of loss.

Lahiri has used food as a channel of reminiscence and a tool to investigate the spatial, ethnic, and identity issues in America. It shows how food plays a part in creating one's identity. The minute details of Bengali and American foods preferred by Ashima and Gogol illustrate the generational conflict experienced by immigrant parents and children. There are many differences between the culinary taste of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli and their children, Gogol and Sonia. The main reason for them to ignore cultural food is because of the gradual rejection of everything Indian. Nevertheless, Ashima and Ashoke organise various Indian festivals like puja, Navratri and Annaprasan. This allows making American-born children study their family lineage, religion, customs, beliefs, rituals, food tastes and cultural behaviour. Hence for Ashima, cooking Bengali dishes is also a kind of ritual, which is seen in the following lines:

“eight thousand miles away in Cambridge she comes to know him. In the evenings she cooks for him, hope to please with the unrationed, remarkably unblemished sugar, flour, rice, and salt she had written about to her mother in her very first letter home. By now she had learnt that her husband likes her food on the salty side that his favourite things about lamb curry is the potatoes and that he likes to finish his dinner with a small final helping of rice and dal.” (NS 114).

For Gogol, his parents' traditions and Indian culture become an object of shame and ridicule. In his childhood, his mother used to feed him by her hands and teach him “how to eat at his own fingers and suck the marrow from Lamb, to extract the bones from the fish.” (NS 55), but as he grew up, he has vanished everything and compares his parents and their lifestyle to his western girlfriend's parents and their life. When Gogol brings his girlfriend to introduce his parents, Ashima warmly welcomes her with delicious Bengali dishes:

“Along with the samosas there are breaded chicken cutlets, chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biryani, chutney made with tomatoes from the garden. It is a meal he knows it has taken his mother over a day to prepare, and yet the amount of effort embarrasses him” (NS 148)

Gogol embraces the liberal western parenting style, which pictures the affluent behaviour against his parent's concern for values and disciplined life with prioritised Bengaliness. Food becomes significant as it shows the cultural identity of the immigrants. Thus, Brinda Mehta says that the “food discourse thus offers microscopic insights into particular worldviews” (qt in Nirmal 115). This view helps the readers to have an insight into the minds of the characters of the diaspora. The discourse on food expresses the voices of the diaspora. “Lahiri says that the mere name of Jhalmuri, dal, kabab, tea and samosas is sufficient to present the uniqueness of Indian food with its spicy flavour, and when Indian eats them in America or London, he is immediately reminded of his past and is instantly connected to the home in his reminiscences.” (Nirmal 115) the melting pot theory comes into the picture while observing Gogol. The second-generation Indians want to deliberately melt into the western melting pot with their American culture. Gogol changes his name to Nikhil, but the name Gogol has given a rebirth to Ashoke, whereas, in the eyes of Gogol, it is a name that has suffered and has undergone a terrible life. Gogol, who becomes Nikhil embraces the western culture with the continental menu of America. Through these names, he becomes a hyphenated soul. However, after Ashoke's death, Gogol changes entirely. He becomes a responsible son. He marries Moushumi on the

will of his mother. Moushumi prefers only pasta and other American food. Due to this, he longs for his mother's home-cooked Bengali food, "the food they'd grown up eating...piling their plates with tandoori chicken and pakoras and Kababs with basmati rice and spices." (NS 229). Regarding Lahiri's discourse on Bengali food to represent the Bengali lifestyle Sam Naidu comments as follows:

"Here, Lahiri uses food as a trope to explore the vicissitudes of the diasporic consciousness...From the outset, food is used to indicate Ashima's feelings of alienation in the diasporic location. She is repulsed by bland 'American food, and her enthusiastic culinary endeavours are her attempts to recreate home." (qt in Nirmal 116)

Ashima in America recreates a homely atmosphere when Ashoke returns from home. she serves samosas and tea for him. It gives a homely comfort for him from the day's work; this positive approach to a new land develops a positive relationship between Ashima and Ashoke. The essence of Bengali food is present everywhere throughout the novel. The food, which acts as an emotional signifier, harmonises the life of the immigrants. During Gogol's Annaprasan Ashima makes payesh for him, a rice pudding. Ashima prepares this on each of his birthdays. On his fourteenth birthday, Gogol invites his American friends. However, Ashima could not satisfy the American kids even after preparing Gogol's favourite dishes with hard labour like "lamb curry, luchis, channa dal with brown raisins, pineapple chutney, sandwiches moulded out of saffron-tinted ricotta cheese". Hence Ashima finds it very difficult to feed the American kids who have an aversion to their Indian cuisines. Thus, food is used by Lahiri to make the immigrants feel at home. She continues to have a pack of Lipton tea in her kitchen, like Ruma in unaccustomed earth, who brings Darjeeling tea and nice biscuits for her father. Food is the central part of life. There is a vast difference when the author depicts the food patterns of the Ganguli and Gerald, and Lydia. When Ashima makes a bowl of payesh to honour Gogol's birthday, Gerald and Lydia pour champagne with cake to celebrate his birthday.

It is impossible for both the immigrant culture and the American culture cannot meet with each other. Hence the immigrants do not give up on their Indian cuisines. Ashima that Gogol is aware that Gogol and Sonia like western food; therefore, she cooks "Sandwiches with bologna or roast beef and bakes Hamburger prepared with ground lamb but on their way to India in the aeroplane with Ashoke she never forgets to order Two Hindu Meals" (NS 80). Indian ingredients are difficult to find in America; while making sweet Sandesh, she replaced it with ricotta cheese because of the unavailability of yoghurt. During her visit to Calcutta, she thinks to herself that "she will not have to go to the trouble of making yogurt from half and half and Sandesh from ricotta cheese... they will be available to her from the restaurants...bearing a taste that after all these years she has still not managed, to her entire satisfaction, to replicate" (NS 277). Though *The Namesake* talks about Ashima's experience in detail, it is an emotional experience that haunts all the immigrants who live in a home away from their homes. Thus, the author's exploration of food and its influence on its characters is detailed in this novel. Through the details of food and cooking, Lahiri portrays the cultural ethnicity and the immigrant capability to bring their homely atmosphere through the influence of food. This perspective of indigenous food also shows the cultural rift between India and America. They can eat Indian curry, dal and Jalmuri at the same time and think of cooking Hamburgers and pasta. Therefore, one can feel easily rooted in their home culture, adapt to their western culture in their host country, and maintain their cultural identity. Jhumpa Lahiri is a second-generation Indian American born to Bengali parents in London and grew up in Rhode Island. Ironically, she does not have a sense of belongingness in any of these countries. Lahiri herself, being a Diaspora, empathised with other Indian diasporas in America. Hence her stories are about the struggles of the Indian

immigrants who experience loneliness, unsuccessful marriage, rootlessness, cultural conflict, and problems in the process of adaptation and assimilation and the identity crisis Jhumpa Lahiri, strives for her native identity and simultaneously struggles to create a new identity in an adopted Anglo-American cultural landscape. Hence, the sense of belonging to a particular place and culture while simultaneously being an outsider to it creates inner tension in her characters.

Lahiri has used the third-person omniscient narrative in most of her stories. The memories of the characters are predominant in the novel. They bridge the gulf between the past and the present. Here also, Lahiri elaborates on the significance of the objects; Ashima carries a few Bengali magazines along with her while travelling to her new home in Pemberton Road with her husband, Ashoke. Ashima associates these Bengali magazines with her hometown. She spends most of her time rereading these books while Ashoke goes to University. "Ashima looks up from a tattered copy of *Desh* magazine that she'd brought to read on her plane ride to Boston and still cannot bring herself to throw away. The printed pages of Bengali type, slightly rough to the touch, are a perpetual comfort to her." (NS, 6). Lahiri focuses on even the minute details that add a flavour to the story, "...patted some cuticura powder from a velvet puff onto her skin." (NS, 7).

Memories and flashbacks also play a significant role in Jhumpa Lahiri. When Ashima is taken to the hospital for her delivery, memories of Ashoke's train accident fill his mind with the same bewilderment he experienced at the time of his accident. For Ashoke moving to America is seen as an act of rescue because the Howrah train accident has taken him closer to death. Nevertheless, Lahiri's use of Nikolai

Gogol's overcoat is a symbol of protection that rescues him from death. This incident traumatised him even after her recovery. Hence, he decides to move to America, and he considers it as a place of his rebirth. "he was born twice in India, and then a third time in America. Three lives by thirty...instead of thanking God he thanks Gogol, the Russian writer who had saved his life." (NS, 21)

Lahiri has used this incident as memory and Nikolai Gogol's overcoat as a significant object that revolves throughout the novel, and the central theme is also structured around this incident.

The address book is an image used by Lahiri to depict the connection between the native land and the host land. Indian immigrants celebrate thanksgiving as a ritual where they share the same food and pay gratitude to one another.

Ashima feels this migration is like a "lifelong pregnancy" (NS 49), and like pregnancy, the life of an immigrant is a concoction of pity and respect. After the death of Ashoke, Ashima prepares to live her life on her own. She says that Ashoke has taught her to live alone. When Ashoke leaves for Ohio Ashima learns to live on her own without depending on Ashoke, Sonia or Gogol. She works in a nearby library, frames her circle, and learns to drive her vehicle.

2. Conclusion

Thus, home is an image that symbolises the place of their own which carries the memories of all the events. After spending twenty years of her life in America, Ashima cannot address Pemberton Road as her home. Similarly, for Mrs Sen, adapting to the new cultural milieu is tedious, and home represents India. In both the stories, Lahiri has used objects and Indian cuisines as a source for the immigrants,

especially for women to feel comfortable and at home in a new milieu. When it is fish for Mrs Sen, it is rice crispies for Ashima that give comfort and acts as a stress buster for women who are at home aloof and isolated.

References

- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1999. Print.
- *The Namesake*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2005. Print.
- Maimi, Irma. *The Politics of Home and Food in Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies*. *The Indian Family in Transition: Reading Literary and Cultural Texts*.
- Sanjukta Dasgupta and Malashri Lal. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007. 159,160. Print.
- Nagarani, D. Object/Subject' Dialectics in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Temporary Matter" and "At Mrs. Sen's" *On the Alien Shore: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee*. New Delhi: GNOSIS, 2010.xiv, 100. Print.
- Nirmal, Arti. *Food and Diaspora: A Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's The Namesake*. *The Vedic Path* 83.3 and 4 (Jul-Dec 2009): 115, 116. Print.