

ISSN : 2395-4132

# THE EXPRESSION

An International Multidisciplinary e-Journal

**Bimonthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access e-Journal**

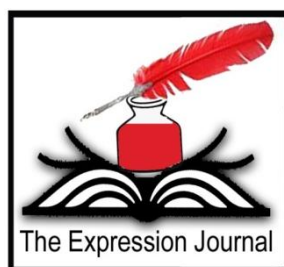


Impact Factor 6.4

**Vol. 9 Issue 2 April 2023**

Editor-in-Chief : Dr. Bijender Singh

Email : [editor@expressionjournal.com](mailto:editor@expressionjournal.com)  
[www.expressionjournal.com](http://www.expressionjournal.com)



## **CENTRE VERSUS MARGIN: AN EXPLORATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S STORIES 'THE THIRD AND FINAL CONTINENT' AND 'MRS. SEN'S'**

**VINITA SHARMA**

**Associate Professor**

**Department of English**

**Dronacharya Government College, Gurugram**

.....

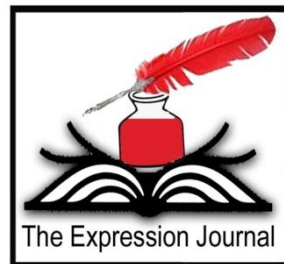
### **Abstract**

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* is a lovely collection of skilfully written short stories. The author's first book focuses on the postcolonial diasporic issues that affect Indians and Indian-Americans who are caught between the forcibly abandoned Indian traditions and the entirely new western culture they must embrace in order to survive. As a result, they live an unstable existence. The diaspora is compelled to preserve the harmony between these two cultures, which are quite unlike. The book is a fascinating read because of the postcolonial cultural identity issue and the treatment of female subalterns in the new social environment. It is noteworthy how the female characters fight to fit into the new cultural identity and achieve validation for it from both the culturally superior validator in the shape of local Americans and their immediately superior male counterpart. The female protagonists put forth effort to express their subaltern stance even as they struggle with the traumatic anxiety of potential success or failure as they forge their new identities in the new circumstanced position. In a patriarchal society, women are merely second-class citizens who lack both voice and authority. The present paper attempts to study, along with pangs of cultural disassociation and identity loss resulting in the pull of home, way back in India, the critical cat and mouse play of superiority and inferiority which keeps changing among the characters in turns. The paper focuses upon two delectable short stories 'The Third and Final Continent' and 'Mrs. Sen's'. In this journey of psychological probing, not only the problem of cultural uprootedness is dwelled upon, but the problem of centre versus margin is also explored. The women characters in such diasporic settings suffer as the roots they belong to have been left far behind in search of a new scintillating world, which makes them all the more nostalgic about their endeared past and their homeland. These women though bravely face the challenges of their new life, but feel deeply hollow inside trying to decode and justify their meaningless existence.

### **Keywords**

Centre, Margin, Periphery, Diaspora, Nostalgia, Alienation, Stance, Subaltern.

.....



## **CENTRE VERSUS MARGIN: AN EXPLORATION IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S STORIES 'THE THIRD AND FINAL CONTINENT' AND 'MRS. SEN'S'**

**VINITA SHARMA**

**Associate Professor**

**Department of English**

**Dronacharya Government College, Gurugram**

.....

Literature has always held a mirror to the apparent or hidden gender affiliations and sexual differences. Feminist writings in general endeavour to deconstruct the social structure of gender and the ancillary cultural setups that help it. Through such writings Feminists have been trying persistently to emancipate women from those structures and setups that have pushed them to marginality. Given that, it is to be understood that inequality of the sexes is not a divine order as much as it is not a biological factor. They are rather the product of the cultural construction or cultural contrivance by the patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir has rightly stated thus: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman... it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (301).

The victims have always emerged as stoics with the special quality of sustenance notwithstanding the general enslavement of women. Women writers' concern has been to bring down the delimiting concepts connected with women which are all pervasive in nature and serve the interests of their male counterparts too. They also strive to formulate a feministic perception by exposing the female thoughts and experiences and their unacknowledged contribution in the cultural growth. The position held by women needs to be re-defined and re-interpreted in the changing socio-economic scenario. The suppression of women is not merely a reality caused by the distressful economic conditions but also attributes to the psychological reasons- how women are perceived by men in the social context and vice-versa. The conventional positions they have held for ages: one is to be looked down upon and the another is to be looked up to, has made all the difference. While everything else seems to have changed dramatically, the situation and position of women in relation to men seems to be stagnant and static.

*Interpreter of Maladies* is beautiful collection of well-crafted short stories written by Jhumpa Lahiri. The debut book by the writer deals with the postcolonial diasporic concerns of the Indians and Indian-Americans whose suspended identity leaves them stranded on the borderline of the Indian traditions that they have deserted forcibly and all new western world that they have to embrace, again forcibly to survive, thus landing them into an oscillating

existence. The diaspora is forced to maintain the equilibrium between these two cultures which are world apart. The postcolonial cultural identity crisis and the fate of the female subaltern in the new social milieu make the book an interesting read. It is interesting to note how the female characters struggle to find a place for themselves in the new cultural identity and to attain a validation for the same not only from their immediate superior male counterpart but also from the culturally superior validator in the form of local Americans. While the women characters are dealing with the traumatic fear of the possible success or failure in the process of forming their new identities, they also exert themselves to voice their subaltern stance.

The need and desire for better livelihood uproot people from their homeland to a new world in search of greener pastures, which all leads to cultural and traditional displacement making them a victim of identity crisis, discomfort of language, racial discrimination, alienation, cultural balkanization etc. all popular terms in diasporic literature. Diasporic Literature delves in the identity crisis, a sense of uprootedness, the resultant emotional disbalances and traumas experienced by the immigrants everywhere in the world.

Living in Diaspora means living in forced or voluntary exile and living in exile usually leads to severe identity confusion. As one moves from the periphery (once own homeland) to the centre (the adopted land), it is compulsive to look back at one's origin or root. The sense of alienation and emotional upheaval is intensely worked up in the women characters in the Pulitzer Prize winning book of Jhumpa Lahiri. Jhumpa Lahiri is just another name in the list of the notable diasporic authors like Salman Rushdie, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anita Desai, and many more. Like all these writers, and alienated diaspora, Jhumpa also suffers the neurosis and the strong nostalgia for the home country's culture, and an intense longing to return and embrace the roots.

The word 'Diaspora', which literally means 'dispersal' in Greek and 'exile' in Hebrew, was originally used to refer to the dispersal or the exodus of the Jews from Palestine. However, the term 'diaspora' later came to be known as the forced or voluntary shift of a sizeable population from their native land to new locale; the communities which have dispersed from the 'center'- the original homelands to the 'periphery' or 'margin'- the foreign lands. The situation ironically reverses when the dispersed population ends up seeing themselves positioned in the marginalized stance in the foreign land and the new found land suddenly assumes the position of the powerful center where these 'expatriates' are pushed further more to the peripheral margin. This cycle of 'center' and 'margin' becomes vicious when the position keeps changing alternatively among the characters, finally leaving the diasporic women, who follow the footsteps of their husbands and land in the new countries along with their spouses, to become the most marginalized in the whole center-margin-sequence.

The present paper seeks to analyze two short stories anthologized in *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999, which bagged Pulitzer Prize for the author Jhumpa Lahiri in 2000. The book is her first attempt at writing comprising nine short stories. All these stories characterize the people who have been uprooted from their dear homeland and put into new surroundings which question about their identity and belongingness. These characters are actually are the prototypes of the writer herself, giving expression to her various selves.

The two stories 'The Third and Final Continent' and 'Mrs. Sen's' taken up for the present study, become all the more interesting with various fissures in the binary oppositions of 'periphery versus centre'.



'The third and final continent' is a first-person story of an Indian immigrant who looks back at his first few weeks in America, 30 years ago. In the late nineteen sixties, at age 36, he arrives to work as a librarian at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, after having studied for 4 years in London (his second continent). Just before coming to America, he takes a trip to Calcutta to "attend" his arranged marriage and leaves barely getting acquainted with his wife. Now "attend" is the lexis that creates another world for Mala, his wife to live in, as his disinterest in wedding and in her, makes no room for her in the centre, beside her husband.

On arrival at Cambridge, Massachusetts, the narrator rents a room in the house of a 103 years old widow, Mrs. Croft, who lives by herself. Mrs. Croft, who occupies the centre is represented by such words like, "(voice) bold and clamorous", 'hollered', 'looked fierce', 'commanded', 'bellowed', 'sniffled' etc. the narrator falls on the fringes in her towering presence. He is forced and feels humiliated, when ordered by Mrs. Croft to utter 'splendid' loudly to laud the American's historical achievement – 'landing on the moon'. He, in a servile manner, follows the instructions of Mrs. Croft.

The scenario changes diametrically when he forms the centre of his home with Mala as his wife. Unconcerned, nonchalant, disinterested, failing to conjure up her image in his mind in her absence, tries hard to getting used to her "meaningless" presence in the house. "In those six weeks I regarded her arrival as I would the arrival of a coming month, or season- something inevitable, but meaningless at the time" (189). Later "the only thing I was not used to was Mala" (190).

The women in the patriarchal world are mere subalterns, speechless and powerless. Mala, 27, married off by her parents, is shipped halfway across the world just to save her from spinsterhood. She is scrutinized by Mrs. Croft, the centre of the marginal narrator otherwise the centric husband, from "top to toe" with what seemed to be placid disdain" (195), looking down upon a culture so different from hers. Mala gains in his esteem only when approved by Mrs. Croft as "a perfect lady". It is now that the narrator being reminded of his own experiences as a bewildered stranger in London generates empathy with his bride and bridges the gap between the two.

Women who treat themselves as secondary inferior beings, seeking validation or justification of their desires and actions by gaining male approval characterize the heroines of Lahiri's stories.

Society has traditionally fostered self- effacement in women. Binary opposition of male and female worlds and the superiority of the male world becomes quite evident as it is revealed that the narrator's mother is driven to insanity by her husband, she is sunk deeper into a world of darkness and could not survive it.

A common thread that runs through both the stories and others too by Lahiri, is the experience of being 'foreign'. Her characters long for meaningful connection. In an attempt to adapt to an unfamiliar world, they don't always succeed, and are eventually homesick or misunderstood.

Mrs. Sen, the titular protagonist of the story 'Mrs. Sen's', is the story of young Bengali wife who relocates with her husband to a coastal, eastern American city and finds herself severed from her known socio-cultural milieu. Mrs. Sen is married to a professor, dedicated to his profession. He spends most of the part of his days at the university and seems to come home only to have dinner or the occasional outings. She is an after-school baby sitter to 11-years- old Eliot. She does not need to work but it is just a way to fill up her lonely afternoons while her husband is away teaching all day. Eliot happens to be the narrator of the story and

the character of Mrs. Sen is unfolded to the readers through the scrutinizing eyes of Eliot. Soon Eliot discovers that Mrs. Sen badly misses her community, her family and friends, even her noisy neighborhood and everything which is Indian and Bengali in particular, and not to be found in America.

Her nostalgia, her yearning for homeland is communicated by such statements, "Could I drive all the way to Calcutta? How long would that take Eliot? Ten thousand miles, at fifty miles per hour?" (119)

"Eliot, if I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (116) and Eliot telling her that they might call her, "but they might complain that you were making too much noise," (117) contrarily.

Eliot's mother belonging to the foreign land, the new centre in the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Sen, notices a kind of strangeness in everything belonging to Mrs. Sen. She finds her dressing, her behavior, her food, her apartment, etc., everything a kind of weird. Here Mrs. Sen is to be viewed to occupy the peripheral spot in relation to the native Americans, Eliot and his mother, forming the formidable center in the scheme of characterization. Eliot also perceives her bewilderment in the strange new culture and suffering a sort of identity crisis. The curious mind of the 11 year old keeps differentiating Mrs. Sen and his mother. As an unbiased narrator, he successfully differentiates the two cultures, in doing so, that these two ladies represent.

Mrs. Sen is a clear victim of cultural estrangement and the sense of loss of belongingness. She quietly suffers and later becomes quite vocal too about her sufferings. She finds her confidante in young Eliot who consistently and endlessly listens to her eloquent tales from India.

It is tragic to note that Mr. Sen, the husband serves no good to repair and reconstruct the broken self of Mrs. Sen who painfully epitomizes the culturally and emotionally starved diasporic beings, an example of those who undergo self-imposed exile from their own countries in order to accompany their husbands to foreign land. Mrs. Sen, lying on the periphery, while the centric husband is preoccupied in his own world, gets frustrated and flings open the drawers of the bureau and doors of the closet revealing saris of every imaginable texture and shade' complaining "when have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?" (125). "Send pictures they write. 'Send pictures of your new life.' What pictures can I send?" they think I live the life a queen, Eliot." She continues further, "they think I live in a palace" (125).

Mr. Sen is rarely to be found about the house as he is busy teaching classes in the college campus and trying to secure his future and stint in America while his wife is struggling with the emotional trauma, suffering within confines of the so-called home. He pressurizes her to learn driving to enable her drive around for marketing by herself and not troubling him to do so. He is a cold and unemotional being who watches nonchalantly, from a distance, his wife struggling to adjust in the new surroundings and expecting her to miraculously adapt to the foreign life, which, in turn, he himself is unsuccessfully trying outside their home.

It is interesting to note how Mr. Sen who authoritatively dons the title of 'centre' at home, is juggling and strenuously maintaining a fine balance in the outside world where ironically, he is merely a meek margin in the big great center, America.

Through Eliot we feel compassion for her with her odour of mothballs and cumin, her fear and frustration learning to drive, her attempt to connect to Eliot's mother who always maintains a distance from her less personally but more socially.

Besides the binary opposition of male and female, the story unfolds one more dimension-‘children versus adults’ world.

Eliot, 11 years-old boy lives with his mother, away from his father. He can feed and entertain himself, but he needs the company of an adult. At home, when back from Mrs. Sen’s, Eliot would eat pizza while his mother sat drinking more wine and would go to the deck to smoke a cigarette, leaving Eliot to wrap up the left overs. Eliot even innocently watched his mother entertaining “a man who’d spent the night in the mother’s bedroom, but whom Eliot never saw again” (123).

After the small accident, an outcome of Mrs. Sen’s incompetent driving skills, Eliot no more was allowed to be attended by Mrs. Sen. He was given the house key, which he wore on a string around his neck and was to call the neighbour in case of an emergency. He was made to believe that he was a ‘big-boy’ then on and he was fine.

## References

- Aruna, G. “Interpreting the Maladies of the Women Abroad: A Study of ‘Mrs. Sen’s’ from Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*.” *Journal of Positive School psychology*. vol. 6, no. 5, 2022, pp. 589-592.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. Routledge, 2007.
- Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Penguin, 1952.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Harper Collins Publishers India, 1999.
- Myles, Anita. *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelists in English*. Sarup & Sons, 2006.