

# Hyphenated Individual in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's"

Dr. S.J. Kala<sup>1</sup>, A. Nilfar Minas<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor of English, Fatima College, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

<sup>2</sup>M.A English, Fatima College, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

**Abstract**—Contemporary narratives reflect the complexities of modern life through innovative forms and diverse voices. Diaspora narrative theory examines stories shaped by migration, displacement and fragmented identities. It explores how memory, belonging and cultural conflict influence the migrant experience. Together, they reveal how contemporary storytelling captures the fluid realities of global movement today. The paper critically reads Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's" through Diasporic Narrative Theory to explore how the protagonist's experience reflects the tensions of cultural dislocation. The story foregrounds "Mrs. Sen's" attempts to sustain her ethnic identity through domestic practices particularly food preparation, language and communal memory which function as narrative strategies for preserving a sense of continuity amid spatial and emotional rupture. The study also highlights the gendered dimensions of diasporic displacement, revealing how isolation, limited mobility and nostalgia shape "Mrs. Sen's" fragmented sense of self. Above all, the analysis will study how Lahiri's story captures the subtle yet intense struggles of diasporic life and will demonstrate how narrative becomes a tool for maintaining coherence in moments of cultural disruption.

**Index Terms**—Diasporic Narrative Theory, Cultural Memory, Migration, Identity, Displacement, Jhumpa Lahiri.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has always reflected the social, cultural and emotional realities of human life. Over time, the emergence of literary theory has helped scholars uncover deeper meanings embedded within texts. As society evolved, narrative forms also changed, moving away from unified and stable representations of reality toward fragmented, interior and psychologically complex storytelling. Contemporary Narrative Theory emerged from this shift, emphasizing silence, emotional interiority and subtle

everyday moments. This evolution in narrative thinking paved way for Diasporic Narrative Theory, which specifically examines stories shaped by migration, displacement and cultural negotiation.

Diasporic Narrative Theory develops from the broader field of diaspora studies and postcolonial criticism. The concept of diaspora gained prominence in the late twentieth century though it cannot be attributed to a single scholar. Thinkers such as William Safran systematized the term in modern academic discourse by identifying common features of dispersed communities including collective memory attachment to homeland and a sense of partial belonging in the host nation. Defining them as groups, Safran explains that, "Diasporas are expatriate minority communities whose members share a collective memory and myth about their homeland" [1]. Later cultural theorists expanded the idea by linking diaspora with questions of identity hybridity and cultural negotiation.

As a literary approach Diasporic Narrative Theory examines how storytelling reflects the lived realities of migration, displacement and cultural transition. It studies characters who inhabit in between spaces and whose identities are shaped by memory, adaptation and social exclusion. This understanding of identity is captured by Avtar Brah, who observes that, "... diaspora is not simply a scattering of people but also a field of identities and social relations that are constantly being reconfigured" [2] The theory pays close attention to narrative voice, domestic space, silence repetition and symbolic objects because these elements reveal the psychological texture of diasporic life. Rather than presenting identity as stable it understands the self as fluid layered and historically situated. The theory primarily deals with themes such as rootlessness nostalgia negotiated belonging cultural translation and emotional geography. It

explores how migrants reconstruct meaning through everyday practices while confronting loneliness marginalization and fractured continuity between past and present.

Diasporic Narrative Theory engages with literary works shaped by the condition of living away from one's place of origin, where migration produces not only geographical movement but also emotional, cultural and psychological dislocation. The concept of diaspora extends beyond physical dispersal to include the persistence of memory, the burden of adaptation and the continuous effort to negotiate belonging within unfamiliar social and cultural environments. As Stuart Hall observes, cultural identities are "...not an essence but a positioning..." [3], suggesting that identity is continuously shaped and reshaped by historical and social contexts. Such narratives therefore resist fixed or stable notions of identity and instead present the self as unsettled, layered and constantly re-formed through everyday practices, silences, routines and acts of remembrance.

Diasporic Narrative Theory is examined through several conceptual features that illuminate the condition of migrant identity. Double consciousness, a term coined by W.E.B. Du Bois, refers to the divided psychological state of living between two cultures, a condition that produces inner conflict and a fractured sense of self. This psychological division finds spatial expression in emotional geography, where places gain emotional meaning through memory, attachment and cultural association. This tension between places and belonging is described by James Clifford, who highlights that, "Diaspora cultures mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement" [4]. Within this lived tension, migrants engage in cultural translation, negotiating their practices, values and self-expression in order to function within a new social environment. These processes often lead the migrants to experience rootlessness and temporal dislocation, where memories of the past disrupt the present and complicate the adaptation to the living environment. Consequently, belonging in diasporic life is always negotiated and it gradually emerges through the continuous act of reconciling the past identity with present experience.

Diasporic experience holds strong literary appeal because migration places individuals between memory and change, creating conditions of emotional and cultural tension. This has led many writers to engage with themes of displacement, belonging and hybrid identity. Authors such as Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul explore postcolonial dislocation, while Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri focus on everyday negotiations of identity within domestic spaces. Writers like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Amy Tan further extend this concern by portraying transnational lives shaped by cultural memory and generational difference. These literary works demonstrate how diaspora has become a significant and enduring subject in contemporary literature.

Several scholars have explored themes of migration, cultural displacement and diasporic identity in contemporary literature, providing a strong foundation for analyzing Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's." Edward Said, in *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, describes exile as "...the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place..." [5], highlights the persistent emotional and psychological tension experienced by migrants. Said's work underscores the fragmented nature of diasporic identity and the struggle to reconcile past and present cultural contexts.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a distinguished contemporary writer whose works consistently examine themes of migration, cultural displacement, belonging and identity within the context of the Indian diaspora. Her literary career encompasses the acclaimed short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), which explores immigrant alienation, marital estrangement and cultural disconnection, followed by the novel, *The Namesake* (2003), which portrays cultural hybridity, generational tension and identity formation within a transnational family. She later published *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), a short story collection that addresses second-generation diaspora, evolving belonging and familial distance.

Lahiri's novel, *The Lowland* (2013) engages with political history, exile and personal loss while examining the long-term consequences of migration and *Whereabouts* (2018) reflects themes of solitude, rootlessness and existential displacement. Lahiri's

writing is marked by stylistic restraint, psychological subtlety and attention to everyday experiences, allowing ordinary moments to reveal deeper cultural tensions. Her essays and translations further indicate her engagement with language and cross-cultural expression. Among this wide range of works, “Mrs. Sen’s” stands out for its quiet yet powerful portrayal of diasporic isolation, cultural memory and gendered displacement, making it particularly suitable for focused critical study.

“Mrs. Sen’s” narrates the life of an Indian immigrant woman residing in the United States who cares for a young boy named Eliot while her husband is at work. The story is presented through Eliot’s perspective, which allows Mrs. Sen’s emotional condition to emerge indirectly through observation rather than confession. Deeply attached to her homeland she finds comfort in preparing traditional meals particularly fresh fish which symbolizes her cultural memory and continuity. Her inability to drive intensifies her dependence and underscores her difficulty in adapting to the expectations of American life. The growing tension culminates in a minor car accident which marks a turning point and reveals the fragility of her attempted adjustment. Through restrained narration and ordinary domestic detail, the story portrays the psychological isolation cultural displacement and unresolved in-betweenness that shape her diasporic experience.

The review of literature for the present study comprises both primary and secondary sources that establish the foundation of the research. The primary text, Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Mrs. Sen’s” (1999), published in *Interpreter of Maladies*, presents a restrained portrayal of immigrant isolation, cultural memory and gendered displacement through domestic detail. Among the secondary sources, A. Maria Deenu Steniza in her article “Traumatic and Harrowing Experiences: A Psychological Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Mrs. Sen’s’” (2021) interprets the protagonist’s difficulty in adaptation as migration-induced psychological trauma, highlighting symbols such as driving, food preparation and silence as expressions of inner conflict. Other critics focus on nostalgia, cultural adjustment and feminist concerns related to domestic confinement.

The secondary sources for the present study include both theoretical works and critical articles that contribute to the framework of Diasporic Narrative Theory. Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” (1990) conceptualizes identity as fluid and continuously reconstructed within historical and cultural contexts. Robin Cohen’s, *Global Diasporas* (1997) further systematizes diaspora by identifying patterns of migration and the characteristics of dispersed communities. Edward Said’s, *Reflections on Exile* (2000) deepens this understanding by describing exile as a lasting emotional rupture between individual and homeland. More recently, A. Maria Deenu Steniza’s article “Traumatic and Harrowing Experiences: A Psychological Reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s ‘Mrs. Sen’s’” (2021) interprets the protagonist’s difficulty in adaptation as migration-induced psychological trauma, emphasizing driving, food preparation and silence as manifestations of inner conflict. Together these works support an understanding of displacement hybridity and negotiated belonging.

Although existing scholarship on “Mrs. Sen’s” has examined themes of nostalgia cultural displacement psychological trauma and gendered confinement, most studies primarily emphasize migration as social or emotional crisis rather than as a subtle narrative construction. Limited attention has been given to the way everyday domestic routines silence restrained narration and ordinary gestures function as structural elements that shape diasporic identity. Furthermore, the interconnected features of double consciousness, emotional geography, cultural translation and negotiated belonging have not been collectively analyzed within a unified Diasporic Narrative framework. This gap calls for a detailed study that interprets fragmented identity not merely as thematic content but as a narrative process emerging through daily lived experience.

The research adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology based primarily on library research. The analysis is conducted through close reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “Mrs. Sen’s,” lays importance on narrative detail, domestic space, symbolic elements and emotional responses of the characters. Secondary sources such as scholarly articles, critical essays and theory-based books on

diaspora and postcolonial studies are consulted to support the theoretical framework. The research relies on established concepts within Diasporic Narrative Theory including double consciousness, emotional geography, cultural translation and negotiated belonging. By engaging with both primary and secondary texts available in libraries and academic databases, the study aims to provide a coherent and text-centred interpretation of fragmented diasporic identity.

The research paper is organized based on features of Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "Mrs. Sen's" to examine the representation of diasporic experience. Following the introduction of Diasporic Narrative Theory, the analysis pays attention to narrative detail, everyday practices and domestic spaces through which cultural displacement and identity are expressed. The analysis then uses the short story, "Mrs. Sen's" as the primary source, while critical essays and theoretical writings on diaspora and narrative studies serve as secondary sources. The study further allows meaning to emerge through sustained engagement with the text, enabling a nuanced understanding of emotional isolation and fragmented identity.

The analysis depends on observing the narrative closely, especially the small incidents, domestic space, memories and emotional responses of the characters. Certain key conceptual features of diasporic experience are used as guiding points for the study. Salman Rushdie, the Indian British novelist, in *Imaginary Homelands* explains that, "Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss" [6]. The study also pays attention to narrative voice and silence as expressive strategies that reveal psychological tension. Symbolic objects and routine activities are examined to understand how identity is shaped through everyday experience. This interpretative approach allows the text to be analyzed as a subtle representation of diasporic fragmentation rather than overt cultural conflict.

Double consciousness refers to the inner state of a person who lives between two cultures at the same time. Such individuals often feel emotionally divided, as their thoughts and feelings are shaped by both past and present environments. This results in a sense of confusion and chaos that leads to the feeling of not fully belonging to either culture. They may

constantly compare the two cultures, trying to reconcile conflicting values and expectations. Through temporal progression, this can create tension but also a unique perspective on both cultural worlds. As W. E. B. Du Bois explains, "One ever feels his two-ness... two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" [7], which clearly captures the psychological division experienced by individuals living between cultural worlds.

The state of double consciousness is seen in Mrs. Sen's constant movement between memories of life in India and her present life in America in the short story "Mrs. Sen's". Her attachment to Indian food habits, such as buying fresh fish and using the Boti, reflects her emotional connection to her homeland. "The blade curved like the prow of a Viking ship" [8]. At the same time, her attempt to babysit Eliot and learn driving shows her effort to adjust to American life. However, her fear of driving and the accident reveal her difficulty in adapting to the new culture, showing how she remains caught between two worlds.

Emotional geography refers to the emotional meaning people attach to places based on memory, culture and personal experience. Places are not only physical locations but also emotional spaces that shape how individuals feel and behave: "Places are not just physical settings but are articulated moments in networks of social relations and emotions" [9]. When people migrate, they often compare their new surroundings with their homeland and this comparison influences their sense of comfort, belonging and identity. As a result, certain places feel emotionally close, while others remain distant and unfamiliar.

The major role of emotional geography in shaping an individual's emotional life is observed in the short story "Mrs. Sen's". India exists for her as a warm, emotionally rich space filled with family, shared living, festivals and familiar sounds. She repeatedly describes how people lived together and depended on one another back home, insisting that "Everything is there" [10], which reflects her belief that completeness and belonging remain tied to her homeland. In contrast, America appears emotionally cold and silent to her, represented by empty streets

and her quiet apartment. Even the ocean in America reminds her of India rather than creating new emotional connections. Her strong emotional response to places shows that although she has migrated physically, her emotional attachment remains rooted elsewhere.

Cultural translation involves the process of adjusting one's cultural practices and values within a new social environment where norms and expectations differ from those of the homeland. It requires reconciliation between inherited traditions and the demands of the host culture, often producing tension and partial adaptation. As Homi K. Bhabha observes, "All forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity" [11], suggesting that identity is reshaped through constant interaction between cultural systems. Cultural translation therefore does not imply complete assimilation but an ongoing movement between familiarity and difference. In diasporic narratives, this process reflects the emotional complexity of living within overlapping cultural frameworks.

Mrs. Sen's difficulty in adapting to everyday practices such as driving reflects her hesitation to fully accept the host culture. Her experience demonstrates that cultural translation is a slow and uneven process shaped by memory, attachment and a sense of cultural displacement. As she remarks, "Everyone drives, Eliot. In India, no one drives" [12], she clearly contrasts the norms of the two cultures and reveals her discomfort with the expectations of American independence. As a result, migrants often remain suspended between their original and adopted cultural identities. The struggles faced by Mrs. Sen to translate herself into American culture outline her experience as a migrant in the country.

Mrs. Sen finds it difficult to understand the American emphasis on independence, particularly the expectation that adults should know how to drive. This cultural difference becomes evident when she tells Eliot, "Everyone drives, Eliot. In India, no one drives" [13]. Her fear of driving reflects her discomfort with American norms and her hesitation to fully internalize them. Although she attempts to participate in American society by babysitting Eliot, she continues to maintain Indian customs within her

home. The car accident ultimately symbolizes her failed attempt at adaptation, suggesting that cultural translation remains a painful and incomplete process for her.

Rootlessness refers to the feeling of being disconnected from familiar cultural and social roots, while reinvention involves creating a new sense of self in an unfamiliar environment. Migration often forces individuals to rebuild their identity and this process can be emotionally challenging. As Robin Cohen points out, migration does not always occur voluntarily but "...often occurs through a combination of choice and compulsion..." [14]. This mixture of desire and necessity makes adaptation psychologically complex. Migrants may feel lonely, isolated and uncertain about how to fit into their new surroundings. Recreating routines, forming new relationships and adjusting to unfamiliar social norms further intensify the struggle. Despite these difficulties, reinvention can also open possibilities for personal growth and self-discovery.

Mrs. Sen experiences deep rootlessness after migrating to America. She is separated from her family, traditions and community and her life becomes limited to her apartment. Although she tries to reinvent herself as a babysitter and immigrant wife, she does not feel emotionally fulfilled. Her lack of independence and social connection prevents successful reinvention. The driving accident marks a breaking point, "She put her head on the steering wheel" [15]. After which she withdraws further, showing how rootlessness overwhelms her attempts to adapt. In Jhumpa Lahiri's story, her withdrawal shows how migration can intensify loneliness when belonging feels fragile. It suggests that reinvention without support often increases displacement.

Temporal dislocation occurs when individuals feel psychologically trapped between the past and the present. Their memories of home and earlier experiences continue to shape their identity, making the present feel unfamiliar and unstable. As Homi K. Bhabha explains, "...the migrant experience disrupts the normal sense of time as the present is no longer simply continuous with the past but is constantly disrupted by memory and difference" [16]. This disruption causes migrants to relive past traditions

and emotional attachments rather than fully engaging with their current environment. As a result, temporal dislocation produces nostalgia, emotional withdrawal and difficulty in adapting to change. With the passage of time, this psychological tension makes adjustment to new cultural spaces emotionally challenging and incomplete.

Mrs. Sen's constant shift between past and present brings out her temporal dislocation. She frequently talks about how things were done in India and compares them to her life in America. Her emotional attachment to her homeland is evident when she says, "Here, in India, we have so many relatives" [17]. This statement reflects her longing for the communal life she left behind. She remains psychologically connected to her past; she struggles to fully engage with her present surroundings. This constant movement between past and present highlights her inability to settle into her new life. In Jhumpa Lahiri's narrative, this dislocation suggests that memory becomes both a source of comfort and a barrier to adaptation.

Negotiated belonging is the gradual effort to feel accepted in a new culture or society. It requires balancing one's original identity with new social expectations and norms. This ongoing process often brings feelings of insecurity and partial acceptance. "Belonging in modern life is increasingly temporary and negotiated" [18]. Individuals constantly resolve their place through interactions and compromises. This condition prevents a stable sense of permanence within the host culture. As a result, belonging becomes a continuous process rather than a fixed achievement in diasporic life.

Negotiated belonging refers to the gradual and often uncertain effort to feel accepted within a new cultural environment while retaining elements of one's original identity. In Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs. Sen's," this process is reflected in the protagonist's attempt to adapt to American life without relinquishing her attachment to India. Her longing for communal intimacy becomes evident when she remarks, "In India, if someone is sick, neighbors come to help" [19], revealing her comparison between the collective culture of her homeland and the isolation she experiences in America. Although she engages with

her surroundings by caring for Eliot and attempting to learn driving, these efforts do not create a stable sense of belonging.

True belonging on the other hand, develops slowly and requires emotional resilience and patience. This idea is echoed by Nira Yuval-Davis, who notes that, "Belonging tends to be naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way" [20]. Thus, belonging is shaped through ongoing dialogue between self, culture and social context rather than a fixed sense of arrival. This process involves reconciling past memories with present realities, allowing individuals to gradually create a sense of stability in unfamiliar environments.

Mrs. Sen's sense of true belonging remains tenuous and incomplete throughout the story. Her bond with Eliot provides temporary comfort, but it does not replace the community she has lost. She depends heavily on her husband for transportation and social interaction, which limits her independence. After the accident, her connection with the outside world weakens further. Her emotional attachment to her homeland continues to shape her identity, as she reflects on India: "Yes ... Everything is there" as she neatened the border of her sari, looking around the room "as if she noticed ... something the rest of them could not" [21]. This longing illustrates how memories of home and cultural familiarity anchor her sense of self, preventing her from fully integrating into her new environment.

The term "hyphenated individual" reflects Mrs. Sen's position between her homeland and the host culture, where she does not experience complete belonging to either of the space. The research has uncovered the fact that "Mrs. Sen's" can be effectively analyzed through the perspective of Diasporic Narrative Theory, as the text closely reflects experiences of cultural displacement and identity negotiation. The study reveals that diasporic identity in the story is fragmented and unresolved, shaped more by emotional dislocation than assimilation. Everyday domestic practices, especially food preparation and routine activities, function as emotional anchors that preserve cultural memory. "Mrs. Sen's" limited mobility highlights the gendered dimensions of diaspora, while the narrative's subtle style conveys

isolation and inner conflict through ordinary moments rather than dramatic events.

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