

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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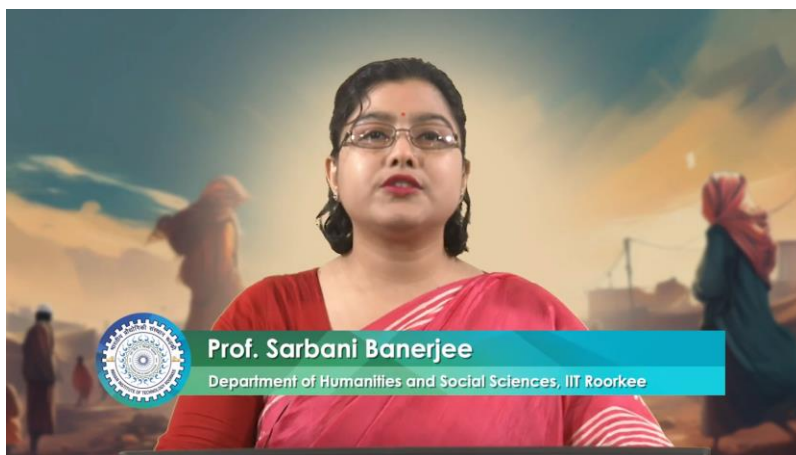
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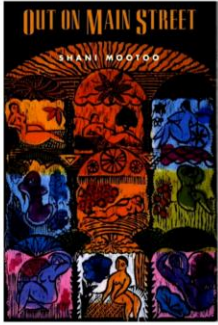
Lecture41

Lecture 41: Hybrid Identity in Jhumpa Lahiri's "Mrs Sen" and Shani Mootoo's Out in the Main Street

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So today we are going to study hybrid identity through two artworks. One is a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri called 'Mrs. Sen,' and then Shani Mootoo's 'Out on Main Street.' These are the two works we are considering today to understand the concept of hybrid identity in diaspora.




So, 'Out on Main Street' is the first short fiction publication by the Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writer Shani Mootoo. 'Out on Main Street' is a collection of nine stories with origins tracing back to the Caribbean as well as the Canadian, the diasporic as well as the continental. So, we see that identity—the question of identity here—becomes something very layered, very complex, and cannot be straightjacketed. Mootoo's epigraph to the collection remains unattributed. However, one can presume that it is her own quotation.





***Out on Main Street* by Shani Mootoo**

- *Out on Main Street* is the first short fiction publication by the Indo-Trinidadian-Canadian writer Shani Mootoo
- It is a collection of nine stories with origins that trace back to the Caribbean and the Canadian, the diasporic and the continental
- Mootoo's epigraph to the collection (unattributed, presumably her own quotation) admonishes against the broad sweep of nostalgic generalization:

Which of us, here, can possibly know the intimacies of each other's cupboards "back-home", or in which hard-to-reach corners dust balls used to collect?





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It admonishes against the broad sweep of nostalgic generalizations. So, this is how Mootoo's epigraph goes: 'Which of us here can possibly know the intimacies of each other's cupboards back home?' 'Or in which hard-to-reach corners dust balls used to collect?' So here we are talking about some very personalized emotions, which are like the dust balls collected in the corner of our mind, in the corner of the human psyche—something that cannot be invaded by the outer world unless it is exposed by the person, unless it is actually recounted or narrated.

It is talking about a certain niche identity, niche experiences. And this is understood in contrast with the diasporic space, in contrast with the new land where a character is made to resettle or find a new life. Shani Mootoo is an author, a visual artist, and a video maker. She was born in Ireland to a Trinidadian family. She grew up in Trinidad and relocated at the age of 19 to Vancouver, Canada.

Currently, she lives in Ontario, Canada. Mootoo's writings have reflected her own lived experiences, which shuffle or play around with her own indentured identity, as well as describe growing up in a multicultural Canada. So we see that Shani Mootoo, the writer and artist, has a very layered, nuanced identity. And through her writing, she is talking about these complex personas, this complex existence that she has in a new land, in a foreign land. So an important review by Novel Niche in 2010 says, I quote,

It seems more likely that her remembrances of Trinidadian rituals, customs, and rites, specifically those pertinent to religious and cultural Indo-Trinidadian minutiae, are infused with the startling though not unwelcome presence and emergence of Canada. So we see that these three countries, with which Mootoo in a way shares her roots, she traces her roots to three different countries, and they somehow are interspersed.

Shani Mootoo

- Shani Mootoo is an author, visual artist and video maker. She was born in Ireland to a Trinidadian family. She grew up in Trinidad and relocated at the age of 19 to Vancouver, Canada. She currently lives in Ontario, Canada
- Mootoo's writings have reflected her own lived experiences that shuffle from her own indentured identity and describes growing up in a multicultural Canada
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They come together to shape her experiences, to make her who she is in the present time. And they actually have a deep influence on her writings. So we see that when she is recounting the Trinidadian rituals and rites, especially the ones that are pertinent today, to her Indo-Trinidadian minutiae, she cannot really decouple these aspects from the presence and immediacy of Canada. Her Indo-Trinidadian self cannot really be divorced from or separated from her Canadian experience, her self as part of Canada.

These different layers of our identity are very closely interlinked. Since 1971, Canada has been implementing the policy of multiculturalism, which is outlined in the Canadian Multiculturalism Act of 1988. This act aims at recognizing and promoting the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance, and share their cultural heritage, unquote. Shani Mootoo's collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street*, begins with the following sentence. It's written completely in broken English, but still, we can find some sense in it.

There is an immediate identification as an Indian reader. So this is how it goes. Me and Janet read. We does go main street to see pretty pretty saree and bangle and to eat we belly full of burfi and gulab jamun. But we do go too often because you see is them sweet self what give people like we a presupposition for untameable hip and thigh.

It's completely broken English. We can see that a lot of people who are arriving in America and Canada and do not have proficiency of English. They speak in similar manner. So there is an immediate connection, identification with this kind of a language.

Out on Main Street

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- Shani Mootoo's collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street* begins with the following sentence:

Me and Janet? We does go Main Street to see pretty pretty sari and bangle, and to eat we belly full a burfi and gulub jamoon, but we doh go too often because, yuh see, is dem sweets self what give people like we a presupposition for untameable hip and thigh.

- The opening sentence immediately transports the readers to a multicultural street in Canada



She is probably talking about a lane, you know, which is occupied by, inhabited by the Indians primarily, it actually displays pretty saris and bangles and burfies and jamuns. And, you know, she's talking about eating those sweets and consequently developing more cumbersome, probably a more corpulent body as a result. So the opening sentence immediately transports the readers to a multicultural street in Canada. The central theme that pervades Mootoo's stories include colonialism, migration, diaspora, multiculturalism, racism and ambiguous sexuality.

So her stories are interested in the hybridist conditions of the world beyond, you know, any reconciliation. It's difficult, almost impossible to claim any kind of purity here in terms of one's identity anymore. The title of the story is also uniquely written in the patois of a Caribbean Indian dialect. So the dialect is not only broken English, it reminds one of the Caribbean Indian dialect.

It offers a narrative style that may initially unsettle the reader. So the expectation of English that the reader brings to table is thwarted, is frustrated. However, as the reader immerses in the language, they are transported into the world of the narrator and her lover Janet. So, the narrator and her lover Janet make a Trinidadian Indian lesbian couple. They are a lesbian couple.

In the title story, *Out on Main Street*, the narrator and Janet are shopping on the main street of the Indian Quarter in Vancouver, Canada. In the sweet shop run by Fijian Indians, we see, as the narrator portrays, the pronunciation and accents that, you know, the narrator and her lover have, this couple have, are treated with contempt, with derision by the shop owner, right? So, on the one hand, we have the Trinidadian Indians that this couple is. Janet and her, you know, and the narrator, they are Trinidadian Indians.

And when they speak English, they are derided. They are looked down upon by the Fijian Indian shop owner. Why? Because the Fijian Indians feel in this case that their Indianness is superior to as compared to the Trinidadian Indians, their Indian background is more authentic.

So the question of authenticity, the question of superiority in the diaspora arises, even as we see that these are people originally from India. They trace their roots, you know, their ancestry to Indian culture, but then the question of superior and inferior arises, better and, you know, worse, lesser or greater. These kinds of, you know, gradations, value additions are coming in.

So, the Fijian Indian shop owner looks down on the Trinidadian Indian couple, lesbian couple because of the way they speak their English. The narrator says, we is watered down Indians. We end good grade A Indians. So, Indianness is also graded once they are placed in a diasporan space. Indianness is not quite the same, but depending on one's background, the way one speaks English, one ought to, you know, be identified as grade A or grade B Indian.

So, they are the watered down Indians as Trinidadian Indians. The narrator further says, we skin brown is true, but we don't even think about India unless something happens over there and it comes on the news. Me family remain Hindu ever since me ancestors leave India behind. But nowadays, they do believe in praying unless things real bad

Because... As my father always sings, like it is a mantra: 'Do good, and good will be bestowed upon you.' Mostly back home, we are kitchen Indians, some kind and Indian food every day, at least once a day. And this goes on.




So, we see that Indianness is retained in terms of certain wise sayings by the father and in terms of culinary habits. So, every day they cook at least one Indian dish as a way of maintaining a connection to their roots. The narrator challenges the notions of cultural purity and with regard to her family and calls them 'watered-down kitchen Indians.' We are kitchen Indians because our Indianness has remained restricted to our kitchen practices—the recipes of food that we still retain from India.

They are neither quite Indian nor something else altogether, and this reflects the hybridity, the layeredness, the complexity of their identity, which cannot be reduced or straightjacketed into something oversimplified. Mootoo further questions cultural identity

and purity. The story unfolds that the narrator's family remained Hindu. However, Janet's family converts to Presbyterianism, so they become Christians.

Out on Main Street

- The narrator further says:
We skin brown, is true, but we don't even think 'bout India unless something happens over dere and it comes on de news. Mih family remain Hindu ever since mih ancestors leave India behind, but nowadays dey doh believe in praying unless things real bad, because, as mih father always singing, like if is a mantra: "Do good and good will be bestowed unto you." [...] Mostly, back home, we is kitchen Indians: some kind a Indian food every day, at least once a day [...].
- The narrator challenges the notions of cultural purity with regard to her family: as "watered-down kitchen Indians," they are neither quite 'Indian' nor something else altogether, reflecting the hybridity of their identity
- Mootoo further questions cultural identity and purity. The story unfolds that the narrator's family remained Hindu, but Janet's family converted to Presbyterianism

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According to Ashvin R. Kini, it is a text that theorizes diaspora queerly to critique the essentialism of diasporic nationalisms. and imagines queer feminist modes of affiliation and collectivity that resist the beckoning call of exclusionary nationalism. So this narrator is displaced from any kind of exclusionary, heteronormative, patriarchal notion of nationalism, both in terms of her ethnicity. She's, you know, displaced twice over. She's, you know, first Indian, then moving to Trinidad, and finally to Canada.

So many layers to her identity, and to make it more complicated, she is a lesbian. In terms of her sexual orientation, she is further displaced from the mainstream. So she in no way actually features in what can be called exclusionary heteronormative nationalism. The story presents the complexities within the characters of the story as different ethnic groups.


It could be drunken Caucasian men and straight Indian women entering the shop. So, complexities start emerging as people from different backgrounds enter the shop. Mootoo examines the prejudice and shifting allegiances brought about when people feel threatened by anything that does not meet their own cultural and sexual norms. Here she explores the nuances of culture in order to reflect that culture is not a static phenomenon, and this is something we have been talking about in our other lectures too.

The fact that culture is not a static phenomenon and that it is possible to forge an identity from multiple and eclectic cultural elements. This can be incorporated into their identities. Our identities are constantly in motion. We are revising, revisiting, problematizing, adding and subtracting elements into and from our identities. We are

being constantly influenced from different, you know, multiple, you know, quarters, multiple sources,

Out on Main Street

- Ashvin R Kini – It is “a text that theorizes diaspora queerly to critique the essentialism of diasporic nationalisms and imagine queer feminist modes of affiliation and collectivity that resist the beckoning call of exclusionary nationalisms”
- The story presents the complexities within the characters of the story, as different ethnic groups - drunken Caucasian men and straight Indian women - enter the shop
- Mootoo examines the prejudice and shifting allegiances brought about when people feel threatened by anything that does not meet their cultural and sexual norms. Here, she explores the nuances of culture to reflect that “culture is not a static phenomenon and that it is possible to forge an identity from multiple and eclectic cultural elements that can be incorporated into their identities” (Kini)



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and we are constantly imbibing or incorporating new cultural elements, and that changes our identity. It can never be something a priori and constant across time and space. So the above observation, the fact that our identity, our culture are all in motion and they're constantly being forged and refashioned through different eclectic cultural elements and influences. This observation is very much in synchronization with what we discussed in our earlier lecture where we were quoting David Cameron as saying that it is important to build a stronger sense of national and local identity that holds the key to achieve true cohesion by allowing people to say I am a Muslim, I am a Hindu, I am a Christian.

But at the end of the day, I am a Londoner too. So if I live in London, over and above my other affinities, my other affiliations, I am a Londoner too. So coming back to Out on Main Street, the story is set in an Indian cafe, which can be read as a space of intersection of various cultures within Canadian society. So in this place called Kush Valley Suites, people from different societal backgrounds come into touch with each other, and the cafe can therefore be termed as what Mary Louise Pratt would call as a 'contact zone.'

So, 'contact zone' results from colonial encounters as the space in which people geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict. So 'contact zone' is always a volatile zone. It is always fraught with problems, fraught with tension because it's a meeting point of people from various backgrounds and such an interface, such a meeting is hardly smooth. It leads to intractable conflicts. It leads to misunderstandings many times.

Out on Main Street

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- The story is set in an Indian café, which can be read as a space of intersection of various cultures within Canadian society. In the Kush Valley Sweets, people from different societal backgrounds come into touch with each other—the café can thus be termed as what Mary Louise Pratt calls a 'contact zone'
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Conditions of coercion emerge and relationships are never ideal or equal. There is always a tendency of one person to or one group to dominate the other. This is what defines the volatile and problem ridden contact zone. That's what 'contact zone' is. Apart from ethnic differences, the unnamed narrator in *Out on Main Street* says,

hesitates to go out in the street also because of her sexual orientation. So it's not only the factor of ethnic difference, but also her different sexual orientation. As a lesbian, her gender and sexuality intersect with her ethnic origin, which add to her further marginalization. It leads to a double marginalization from the public sphere, that is the street, because the street has been constructed as a predominantly heteronormative space. The narrator is aware that she is not welcomed in this little India on the Canadian streets because her very presence tends to disrupt and unsettle gender norms.

In her study of the queer diasporic experience in a South Asian context in the work *Impossible Desires*, the work is titled *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, which came out in 2005. Critic and scholar Gayatri Gopinath asserts that, I quote Gopinath, within patriarchal, diasporic, and nationalist logic, woman and lesbian were configured as mutually exclusive categories and a threat to the very concept, the very principle of Indianness. So being a lesbian and a woman was not something to be ashamed of, primarily because it was not even thought about.

These were kind of invisibilized categories. It was unthinkable being a woman who is a lesbian. It was not talked about because it was unthinkable, unimaginable, and unmentioned, and this entailed that virtually it did not exist because if it did not exist at the level of common parlance, at the level of language,

Out on Main Street

- Apart from ethnic differences, the unnamed narrator also hesitates to go out in the street due to her sexual orientation. As a lesbian, her gender and sexuality intersect with her ethnic origin, adding to the double marginalization from the public space (street) that has been constructed as a predominantly heteronormative space. The narrator is aware that she is not welcomed in the 'little India' on the Canadian streets because her presence disrupts gender norms
- In her study of the queer diasporic experience in a South Asian context in *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (2005) Gayatri Gopinath asserts that: 'within patriarchal diasporic and nationalist logic, "woman" and "lesbian" were configured as mutually exclusive categories and a threat to "Indianess".'
- Being a lesbian and a woman was not something to be ashamed of because it was not even thought about: it was unthinkable, unimaginable and unmentioned, which entailed that, virtually, it did not exist'



If it was semantically unavailable, you know, it was something unspeakable, then, you know, the possibility of it being socially out there would be almost nil. So such a category as a woman and a lesbian is not discussed precisely because it is not expected to be out there on the main street. Therefore, the Canadian society in Mootoo's story is basically imagined as a cultural mosaic where a figure such as the narrator, this unnamed narrator, her very presence on the street can disrupt the heteronormativity. The unnamed narrator's Trinidadian culture, the baggage that she brings from various backgrounds, various lineages she is carrying, is shown as hybrid and heterogeneous in the first place. So, assigning one singular cultural identity to the narrator and her friend Janet is therefore not possible owing to its complicated nature.

Their identities are complicated. Furthermore, the relationship that Janet and the narrator share is also quite complicated and defies definition in a way. Although their roots lie in South Asia, they cannot be sweepingly categorized and identified as Indian. It's not as oversimplified as that. They carry, you know, a legacy from different countries.



They have their roots, you know, tracing back to different countries. In the Canadian multicultural society, the narrator can be ethnically categorized as a Hindu or Indo-Trinidadian Canadian, whereas Janet can be described as a Protestant Indo-Trinidadian Canadian. So, that in a way encapsulates in one, you know, phrase their religion, their affiliations with different countries, and so forth. However,

Despite such categorizations, which are pretty complicated, these labels are probably not adequate in capturing the nuanced ethnic, social, national, and gender aspects that constitute these characters' identities. So, from Shani Mootoo's 'Out on Main Street,' I would now move on to a short story written by Jhumpa Lahiri. It's titled 'Mrs. Sen.' 'Mrs. Sen' is taken from the short story collection 'Interpreter of Maladies.' 'Interpreter of Maladies' was the first book written by Jhumpa Lahiri, which won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize.

Jaya Lakshmi Rao V. states in her article titled 'Jhumpa Lahiri, a Perspective Interpreter of Maladies,' I quote Lakshmi Rao: 'With remarkable insight, she delves deep into the psychological depths of her characters and reveals their inner world through a fascinating yet deceptively simple style,' unquote. So, Lahiri depicts Indianness in an unusual foreign setting through Indian characters, food, costumes, and habits. Her collection of nine stories, entitled 'Interpreter of Maladies,' speaks about the alienation and rootlessness experienced by immigrants in the host land of America. In the same tone, 'Mrs. Sen' is about the life of an Indian woman who has been transported to a society that is alien to her. She finds herself a total misfit in American society.

Despite her attempts to adjust to her surroundings, her sensitive soul seeks the nourishment of home. She has been uprooted from her Indian culture and grafted into American society by virtue of marriage. After marriage, she had to travel to America with her husband and finds herself in a very uncomfortable position, in a very unfamiliar way, as she has to adjust to American society. So, once she has to travel to America with her husband after her arranged marriage, she finds herself in a very uncomfortable position and feels she needs to adjust a lot to belong to American society.

Mrs Sen

- Her collection of nine short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, speaks about the alienation and rootlessness experienced by the immigrants in the host land (America)
- “Mrs. Sen” is about the life of an Indian woman who has been transported to a society that is alien to her. She finds herself as a total misfit in the American society. In spite of her attempts to adjust to her surroundings, “her sensitive soul seeks nourishment of the home.”
- Mrs Sen has newly immigrated to the United States after her arranged marriage to Mr Sen, who is a College Professor of Mathematics in the US. She feels isolated upon her arrival and misses her family in India. She also feels distant from her husband because he is mostly busy with his work and remains outside. In this new land, Mrs Sen strives continuously to preserve her Indian way of living through various means.



In the story, Mrs. Sen has newly immigrated to the United States after her arranged marriage to Mr. Sen, and Mr. Sen is a college professor of mathematics in the U.S. She constantly feels isolated upon her arrival and misses her family in India. She also feels distant from her husband. This is because her husband is mostly busy with his work and remains outside the home.

He has his own academic engagements, which leaves this woman, the protagonist of the story, quite, you know, in a lonely state. She is almost in a solitary confinement in a new land. So in this new land, Mrs. Sen strives continuously to preserve her Indian way of living through various means. So as a way of retaining her Indian-ness, she is using these different props, these different kitchen practices or kitchen culture that ties her, that connects her to her native country. Her affinity towards the native country is reflected through her, you know, habits and behavior.

Mrs Sen

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- “Mrs. Sen” is about the life of an Indian woman who has been transported to a society that is alien to her. She finds herself as a total misfit in the American society. In spite of her attempts to adjust to her surroundings, “her sensitive soul seeks nourishment of the home.”
- Mrs Sen has newly immigrated to the United States after her arranged marriage to Mr Sen, who is a College Professor of Mathematics in the US. She feels isolated upon her arrival and misses her family in India. She also feels distant from her husband because he is mostly busy with his work and remains outside. In this new land, Mrs Sen strives continuously to preserve her Indian way of living through various means.




She dresses in an essentially Indian fashion. She puts a dot of vermilion on her forehead and her taste for whole fresh fish that she cuts using an angular blade in Bengali, it's


called *boti*, and her traditional way of cooking and hospitality also. All these, you know, small things in her at the everyday level portray her as a traditional Bengali woman. Through these means, you know, using this angular blade, her taste for fish, her way of cooking, her way of dressing and putting a dot of vermillion on forehead.

All these things, you know, make her feel that she's close to home. These are ways of overcoming her loneliness, her dissolute status in the new land. So Lahiri brings out the loneliness and hollowness that Mrs. Sen is suffering throughout this story plot as a first generation immigrant in the US. She involves herself in cooking her Bengali food, which reminds her of her home back in Calcutta to remain engaged in some activity, she decides to babysit a 12-year-old white American boy whose name is Eliot.


Mrs Sen






- Her affinity towards her native country is reflected through her behaviour. Her dress, the dot of vermillion on her forehead, her taste for whole fresh fish that she cuts using an angular blade (*boti*), and her traditional way of cooking and hospitality portray her as a traditional Bengali woman. Through these means Mrs Sen tries to overcome her loneliness. Lahiri brings out the loneliness and hollowness suffered by Mrs. Sen, a first-generation immigrant in the US



- She involves herself in cooking her Bengali food that reminds her of her home back in Calcutta. To remain engaged in some activity, she decides to babysit a 12-year-old white American boy named Eliot, whose mother is a working woman



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And Eliot's mother is a working woman. Just like Mrs. Sen's husband does not have time for her due to his other pressing engagements, Eliot's mother is also a working woman who cannot find enough time for the child. So Eliot is soon integrated into the Sen household and witnesses Mrs. Sen's loneliness and longing for her homeland. She is talking to this juvenile, this child, and she relieves her frustration through this conversation.

One day she asks Eliot, 'If I begin to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?' She is so lonely that she reveals to the child that she wants to scream at the top of her lungs, and she wonders whether anyone would even come in response to her scream. She further tells Eliot that at home, all one needs to do is raise one's voice a bit or express joy of any kind, and a whole neighborhood and half of another would come to share the news and help with arrangements.

So there are people to aid and support you in times of emotional crisis. All you need to do in an Indian society is scream, and you can have an entire neighborhood gathered around you, ready to help. But not in America. American neighborhoods are eerily, uncannily quiet. That further amplifies and, in a way, exacerbates her loneliness.

Mrs. Sen's loneliness, her feeling of desolation and her problems of acculturation are reflected when she brings Eliot into her room and starts showing him, showing a kid all her sarees that were stored away in her closet and drawer, and she starts telling him where she has ever worn the sarees. So we see that this is a woman bereft of any companion in the new land and she finds no one else but a little kid of 12 to whom she shows her sari collection and she starts, you know, recounting where she wore each of them. So on another occasion, we find Mrs. Sen describing the silence of the U.S. neighborhood as something disturbing, something eerie.

She cannot sleep properly because silence bothers her a lot. She comes from a very normal, noisy, you know, environment where people show up, their concern readily for one another and she misses a sense of community in this alien land. For Mrs. Sen, Eliot is the go-to person for sharing all her anguish, all her pain and angst. A wonderful companionship between

two people who are entirely different in terms of their age, in terms of their varying cultural backgrounds. And this companionship has been very beautifully depicted by Jhumpa Lahiri in her story. They develop an emotional dependence which binds them in the absence of their immediate family. Just like Mr. Sen is conspicuous by his absence, we see that Eliot's mother is also not present many times. So Clifford James Gird states in the article *Diasporas*, which was published in *Cultural Anthropology*, I quote, life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful,

Struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies, unquote. So through this story of Mrs. Sen, through the loneliness depicted in Mrs. Sen's life, Jhumpa Lahiri basically documents the life of any Indian woman who is in a state of emotional exile. Here, it is very interesting to note that Mrs. Sen's first name is never mentioned. She could be anyone, you know; it doesn't matter.


No one—there is no one to call her by her first name. Our first name—that's what our first names are for. So she's so lonely that there is not a single person around her to call




her by her first name. The reader never gets to know what her name is. She is reduced to Mrs. Sen.

She's in a new land. Her designation is just that she's the wife of a professor. She is nothing more or less than that. So this anonymity, this anonymity falls heavily on her identity. It kind of crushes her, just becoming a no one.

Mrs Sen

- For Mrs. Sen, Eliot is the go-to person for sharing all her anguish. A wonderful companionship between two entirely different people belonging to different age and varying cultural backgrounds is witnessed. 'They develop an "emotional dependence" which binds them in the absence of their immediate family' (Lakshmi Rao)
- Clifford James Geertz states in the article "Diasporas" that was published in *Cultural Anthropology* that:
Life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful, struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work and with the claims of old and new patriarchies (314)
- Through the story of Mrs. Sen, Jhumpa Lahiri basically documents life of an Indian woman who is in a state of 'emotional exile' (Lakshmi Rao)



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From being someone special, you know, back in her own homeland to becoming a no one, just a missus of someone, a wife of a professor who is forever busy. That kind of bitterness is reflected in the title of the story, Mrs. Sen, where the first name is forever absent. Similarly, we see that Mr. Sen's name is also not mentioned. They are just playing a couple. They are just playing a husband and wife in a new land.

There is no emotional excess in this relationship. They are just doing their day-to-day activities on a routine basis. And this kind of routine life is so suffocating, it almost engulfs the female protagonist's identity. So Mrs. Sen is a first-generation migrant, a reluctant immigrant who travels to a new land for the sake of her husband's job. Right.

And there she gets reduced to just being someone's wife, sans her first name. Her nostalgic feeling toward her homeland, India, makes her so preoccupied that she keeps listening to the audio cassettes with recordings from her family back in India. And she asks Eliot, 'Could I drive all the way to Calcutta?' She misses her home so much. The feeling of nostalgia persistently haunts the immigrants.

This is reflected through this story. Eliot's mother is initially apprehensive about sending the child to Mrs. Sen's home. Earlier, we find Eliot had been looked after by a college student named Abby and then by another woman named Mrs. Linden in their own home. However, in the case of Mrs. Sen, she convinces Eliot's mother by saying that her home

is quite clean and safe for a child. Mrs. Sen is unable to go to Eliot's place to babysit him because she does not have a driver's license.

So, we see that this woman is truly handicapped. She is crippled in terms of her social mobility as well. Even when she learns to drive after much difficulty, she still prefers to take a bus to travel and asks Mr. Sen to drive when she goes to buy fish. So, all in all, we find that a woman like her finds it very difficult to adapt to a foreign land.

Basically, Lahiri here is projecting and portraying how Mrs. Sen fails to adapt in an ostensibly multicultural American society. She finds no individual space, no special place for herself in this society where she can voice her thoughts, her own needs, where she can express her choices, or where she can carve out her own way of living through her likes and dislikes. With this, we come to the end of today's lecture. Let us meet with a new topic in our next lecture.

Thank you.

