

[Camille Wiese]

Diaspora in “Mrs. Sen”

**Diaspora**

The word “Diaspora” is of Greek origin and it is used to refer to the people who have been displaced from their territory or land. The dispersion usually occurs throughout the world. There are different understandings of the Diasporas. Diasporas may desire to be absorbed into the new environment they are living, but they may still want to maintain their distinction to other races. This they want to do as a Diasporas community due to their loyalty to their community. The institution and network formed by these people allow them to establish and adopt patterns that are usual to the community as an ethnic group that is surrounded by a major community but is also aware of their primordial particularism. This refers to their language, religion and culture. A diasporas community has loyalty that exists beyond the boundaries of the environment they are living in. This causes them to be loyal across the boundaries and thereby link them to a transglobal entity. This is the reason why they are therefore less permeable to assimilating into the culture of host country. Such communities then prefer to live close with each other while retaining their language, culture and values. They may be equally participating in every day affairs such as education, schooling, work and other aspects of socialization, but still remain unabsorbed into the culture of the host country. This is the reason why even if such a community tends to adjust to go through the process of acculturation, still it does not lose its original identity. It remains true very much to its original culture.

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The underlying point after having said all this is that a Diasporas community is still not in a constant process. This implies that the processes which the Diasporas community goes through may differ from one ethnic group to the other or differ from country to country. This means that it is not necessary that the characteristics shown by one diasporic community will also be found in the other diasporic community. They will probably differ a lot. This is due to several reasons. The most important reason is the loyalty that the members of a particular Diasporas community have towards their religion, culture and language. The second reason is how their culture conforms to the culture of the host country. Yet another reason is that the Diasporas community may come out to be severely restricted in the host country. Despite these many different reasons and factors, the common things about a Diasporas community are that its communities tend to remain united. They commonly live in close communities and have their own groups and social events. They may use a different language with members of other community but with each other they use their traditional language. The same goes towards other forms of socializing.

Earlier on, the diasporic discussion was mostly related to the concept of homeland and that of the Jews. This is to say that the most common Diaspora was the Jewish Diaspora. However, with time the meaning has been extended to many other communities who have been displaced from their homes. One such community is the Indian community that is dispersed all over the world and in each and every continent. One of the largest Asian Diaspora is the Indian Diaspora. More than 25 million Indians are spread in almost each and every country of the world. They are not just one race, but constitute heterogeneous community. They represent different places of India, differ religions, languages and cultures.

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In the world of post-colonial literature, Diaspora has remained somewhat a new term that does not have much usage. However, it has gained international recognition in research recently as it has been employed to convey various phenomena that are similar to several discourses that are connected to translational globalization. Examples are borders, exile, refugees and immigration. What we see in this short story is immigration. The immigration signals a link between the diversification that exists in the cultures of America and India. It also exhibits the differences in the histories, places, times and people. These differences are exactly what keep Mrs. Sen so distant from the American society (Shankar & Cheung, p. 23).

The imagery has important functions. They are more than just food and driving. They have an important meaning that is also a way of Mrs. Sen to be able to remain connected to her country. They allow her to remain connected to the traditional culture of her own country. This is what the image of fish functions. Fish has always been the favorite meat of Bengalis. This is because the population of Bangladesh relied chiefly on fish for their food. Even though she lives in India, she longs for fish because she is a Bengali and being a Bengali, she must have been brought up as one. Therefore, her tastes would not be very much different than the other Bengalis. The fish in this way has an important function and an important meaning for her. It allows her to remain connected to her homeland despite being millions of miles away. Hence, when she goes out buying fish, it reminds her of her own country. When she consumes fish, her connections with her homeland are further strengthened. These are the ways in which she stays in close proximity with her homeland while being in America. These are also evident that she is still very much an immigrant as they demonstrate that she intensely misses her country and these are nothing else but feelings of home sickness. This is evident in the following lines:

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“In the supermarket I can feed a cat thirty-two dinners from one of thirty-two tins, but I can never find a single fish I like, never a single.” Mrs. Sen said she had grown up eating fish twice a day. She added that, “Calcutta people ate fish first thing in the morning, last thing before bed, as a snack after school if they were lucky” (Mandal, p. 3).

The symbol of fish is deeply connected with her former life. It was part of her life each day. She probably ate it in breakfasts and in dinners. She would have eaten it while being in school and while on outing. Hence, this signifies her closeness to fish, and its importance in functioning as a symbol that would allow her to remain connected to her country. However, these symbols also convey something that would deeply aggrieve her. Whatever she loves or likes is in India. This is one of the reasons why she would feel so disconnected and aloof in the American society because she cannot find anything that she likes in America. This would surely be contributing towards the aloofness she feels in America. This is why she makes so many attempts in trying to remain connected to her country through these symbols (Shankar & Cheung, p. 24).

The so called Diaspora exists in this story for the most part because the protagonist refuses to absorb into the American society. This can be understood because she loves and dearly misses her homeland. In fact, this was evident from the very beginning when she came to America because her husband wanted her to, and there was no willingness of her own to come to the new country. The Diaspora gains intensity as she engages in a struggle which could be correctly termed as being an internal conflict for trying to fight back for her own identity. She tries to constantly perpetuate her own identity even when her husband tries to convince her to learn driving or when he tries to convince her to buy something else apart from fish. This can be termed to be the result of the internal conflict that is waging on inside her for trying to cope with

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the new situation, while also maintaining her strong identity. Her attempts are reflective of her desire to assert her own identity. Buying and cooking fish represent more than just an act of preparing and consuming a meal. They identify her internal conflict that is waging on inside her and her desire to attempt to remain a Bengali in a foreign land (Roy, p. 471).

### **Mrs. Sen**

What we see throughout the story is a main character who is beset with an internal conflict that drives her to act with a rebellious attitude every now and then. This rebellion and internal conflict inside her stems from the fact that she desperately wants to maintain her own identity despite the prospectus of being in a country where millions of people aspire to be. Her aloofness can be understood to be the result of her love for her homeland and her desire to remain connected to her past. This is the reason why she can be regarded as always being an immigrant because she refuses to adjust to the American culture (Maini, p. 157).

This transition is not an easy task for her and it becomes extremely hard for her to adjust to these changes. This was evident from the very beginning as she did not immigrate to America owing to her own desire. It was because her husband wanted that she came to America. It must be kept in mind that this has an important meaning. Her not desiring to be in America makes her very different to the other immigrants who came to America with dreams. When she came to America, she had no demands and no aspirations. Like the millions of other Americans, she had no desire of being financially well off. She had no reason for fleeing her homeland because she was not being persecuted. The driving force that attracted millions of immigrants to America and still do are desires for economic freedom, and other freedom. She had none of these elements inside her. This is why we see a different immigrant inside her. There is no happiness inside her

for having immigrated to America. These are the reasons why she is unable to adjust to the American society like others (Maini, p. 158).

Though Mrs. Sen has tried to adjust to the situation, yet it is not conducive to her advantage. This is because she rarely gets to anything else apart from looking after the 11-year-old boy. Her husband is a professor in an American university and spends the major part of his time there. All what she has to do is to look after Elliot, baby-sitting after him. However, her husband is not entirely insensitive to her as he does teach her how to drive so she can become more independent like other Americans. However, she still feels the aloofness and displacement. This is made clear in the imagery implied in the story. The imagery is strong symbols that convey deep and profound meaning. In this story, the readers are introduced to two strong symbols of food and driving. These symbols represent strong and deep meanings. These symbols are reflective of the feelings that are deep inside her. They elaborate the feelings of displacement that she is feeling inside her. This is because owing to her immigration to America from homeland, she is going through a cultural transition (Maini, p. 158).

This story explores Mrs. Sen's life not through an Indian point of view but from a European one. The story comes out to be a typical one in which a person who is an outsider to the culture of America tries to confront an entirely new identity and culture. Little respite is found in terms of her husband who hardly remains with her for a few hours with her. The story is representative of the immigrant who remains an immigrant. The trajectory of the immigrant is the path that is away from the geographical home of the character to a homeland that had been imaginary. It does not develop its root in the routed space. It does so investing in the few symbols that are of identify and this includes food. Food comes out to be a part of the entire range of important things that the immigrants expect to adopt and adept. Through the repeated

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purchase a consumption of food that becomes a daily habit. The immigrant in Mrs. Sen is perpetuating her ethnic identity (Shankar & Cheung, p. 24).

### Elliot

The entire story is shown from the narrative of a boy named Elliot. The entire story depicts what a child would be thinking of the different characters he witnesses. Mrs. Sen's kitchen according to the child was filled with mysterious and dangerous things. The contrast between Mrs. Sen and the mother of Elliot is also delineated as the child notices that in contrast to Mrs. Sen who would be covered up in her sari. Her mother had somewhat bare attire. The way the mother of Elliot acts towards the kitchen and in the way she shows reluctance in preparing an complicated food or consuming a stomach full on the basis of it being a non-formative approach outlines the difference she has with Mrs. Sen. Though Elliot's mother hardly cooks, Mrs. Sen loves to cook. However, being more skilled in the kitchen, Mrs. Sen is completely a stranger to the world of outside. She cannot drive or move outside all alone and tackles the boy along with her (Garg, p. 74).

One another story that has been told from the perspective of a child was that of "To kill a Mocking Bird." However, unlike the child character named Scout or Jean Louise Finch in that novel, the main character in this short story does not have a bold father like Atticus to take care of her. She also does not have nice neighbors like Miss Maudie to provide her a time pass. She is left all alone to fend for herself in a completely new culture and society. This does confound her with a deep problem as being a woman, she is completely reliant on her man to rid her of the loneliness or the feeling of what writer's term as Diaspora. This so called Diaspora is unable to get away from her because she relies completely on her husband, and her husband apart from encouraging her to learn to drive so that she can be independent has done nothing else for her.

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He is not present for her like Atticus is for Scout when she needs him the most. The challenge that Mrs. Sen faces on account of being in a new place is not less than the challenge that Scout faced while trying to adjust to the prejudice that existed against the blacks. Like said earlier, Mrs. Sen's problem remains costly on the front line because she does not have the support of a character like Atticus (Gunew, p. 93).

## **The immigrants in Mrs Sen**

The entire short story reflects on the Mrs. Sen and she is throughout shown as an immigrant who is weary of the American life in many ways. Her aloofness to the American society does not represent any biasness or prejudice on her part, as there is no evidence whatsoever in the entire story in any way to suggest that she has any sort of loathing for the American culture. This is also evident in her behavior and the way she views the American society. The underlying problem is that she since the beginning to the end remains an immigrant. This is because she is unable to adopt the ways of the American society and life. Her difficulties in adjusting to the American way of life are the result for her longing her former life. Even though she has come to America, in no way has she been able to forget her previous life or her country. She possibly faces an identity issue inside herself though it is not clearly mentioned, yet as the story progresses; it becomes quite evident that this is likely the case (Maini, p. 159).

What we see throughout the story is that this same immigrant tries to adjust to the way of American life. However, we clearly feel that even though the character attempts to do this, yet there is a strong bond that she has maintained with her homeland. She may be termed as being home sick in the sense that she misses her country dearly. This problem may not be just limited to her as this problem confounds millions of other immigrants who come to America. In her desire to be in America, we see a different in her. This is because her arrival in America does not



match the dream with which the other millions of immigrants have been pouring into America. This is because the story that we read tells us the experiences faced by her after she has emigrated from Calcutta to America. What we are shown is an unhappy Indian Bengali housewife who has merely immigrated just because her husband wanted her to, and this is clearly the case because there was no consent of her own. Being the typical Indian wife, it is quite understandable that she would do what exactly her husband tells her. This is because typical Indian wives are obedient to their husbands. This shows a major difference between her and the other American female character who is the mother of Elliot. Indian wives in contrast to the American ones are shown to be more dependent on their husbands (Maini, p. 160).

This daily habit has become an important part in her life that links the binaries of her home and her new home abroad. The writer while conveying a narrative and personal depiction of food has attempted to deliberate on the important question of identity that faces the immigrant population when they are away from home. The writer tries to portray the Bengali Americans what she would define as being Diasporas subjects who are trying to reiterate their own personal identity through the cooking and consumption of Bengali food on a daily basis. The writer uses food as a symbol that allows her character of Mrs. Sen to merge in the backdrop of being homesick (Mandal, p. 17).

Food is more like a universal symbol that is found not just in this story, but in her other stories as well. The writer tries to contrast the world of inside with the outside. This she does so while establishing the difference that exists between the inside world and the outside world. A persistent nostalgia is evident through the various imageries of food in the story. Food however has a much different meaning and significance as it provides an additional dimension to the character for forming a daily habit in her life cycle. Also while taking it at the personal level, the

gastronomic details that the writer provides can be taken as being the variable that signifies success or failure in the relationship that exist between the different characters. Food has therefore become a symbol of domesticity that has both liberating and constricting possibilities (Gunew, p. 96).

Mrs. Sen's life has alluded to the Bengali occupation with the fish. She attempts to face her new life not by trying to adopt the ways of the new country, but by trying to cling to her old ways. These include her culinary habits. The food or the symbol of fish is not just a symbol that talks about food but underlines the importance of the loneliness in her life that is the result of her not adopting to the new culture. It accounts for the so called Diaspora that she is faced with. Even a child like Elliot is able to notice that that there were two things that made her happy. Hence, these two things would have had a very important meaning for her. These two things were receiving a letter from her home country and when she went to buy whole fish from the seaside. Hence, it can be stated that she felt as a stranger in the new country and tries to constantly remain in touch with things that would remind her of her earlier life. When she gets chance to be affiliated with her homeland through letters or fish, she takes full advantage of them and this is what makes her very happy. The happiness is so evident that even an 11-year-old child is able to notice it clearly (Gunew, p. 99).

Fish is definitely a potent symbol that is associated with the Bengalis. This is also because foreigners be it the Europeans or the Americans, they consider the Bengalis to be unable to consume a meal that is composed of fishes. Mrs. Sen yearns for being able to attain a real taste of her own home and therefore she recreates the flavors that were available in her homeland so that she can go on to enjoy the delicacy of her homeland and in this way preserve her own identity. Cooking fish and consuming it again and again with different flavors also constitute a

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rebellion on his part. This rebellion is because she does not want to adjust to the new culture and society. The more she misses her own county, the more efforts she puts into cooking fish and the passion inside her to keep connected to her homeland increases. This is indicative of the so called Diaspora that exists inside her. It is precisely through this very act of cooking fish that she tries to evade her husband's commands to cook something else apart from fish or learn to drive. The kitchen allows her a way to refuse assimilation into the American culture and marks her rebellion not only against the American culture and way of life, but also acts as a way of preserving and asserting her identity of being Bengali in a foreign land (Roy, p. 473). In many ways, this story resembles of the epigram by Janice Marikitani who was a poet and activist of Japanese origin living in America.

“Making fish is a political act.”

This underlines the importance that the Bengali people had for fish. It is worth noting that Mrs. Sen has been making frequent phone calls to get the fish of her preference. These choices reflect her choice of wanting and longing for her homeland. Preparing fish is not just an act of cooking daily food but also a silent battle that she is waging to perpetuate her personal identity. In the so called Diasporas life, cooking fish comes out to have several meanings in her life. The fact is that the writer has resorted to a dull and repulsive manner of describing the chopping of fish, but in a very sensuous manner. Mrs. Sen enjoys it even though preparing such a meal is laborious and difficult process. The point of view of the child and his sense of understanding demonstrate the difference that exists in the culture of Mrs. Sen and the American culture (Gunew, p. 100).

Being at both the need of the kitchen, she is both the producer and consumer. This is because she cooks fish not for her husband but for herself. This is evident when her husband asks

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her to make chicken, and she goes out to the market to buy in order to reinforce her own image of being a Bengali. She is cooking fish only to enjoy eating and cooking. The desire inside her to consume fish is more than just a desire of consuming food. It is to reassert her identity. Her longing for fish is often depicted to a comical extent and she resorts to an insane rebellion for pursuing with her desires (Garg, p. 76).

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