

The Analysis of Diaspora Women's Identity in *Interpreter of Maladies* from the Perspective of Postcolonial Feminism

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The famous Indian-American female writer Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* describes the diaspora's emotional experiences in the heterogeneous space. For three diaspora women in the novel, different characteristics are manifested for their formation of the identities due to their different life experiences: Boori Ma is a "voiceless" other; Mrs. Sen is a brave identity reconstructor; and Twinkle becomes a representative of "hybrid" identity. Compared with the former, the latter's identity establishment presents a more positive state, conveying Jhumpa Lahiri's longing for diaspora women to build a positive cultural female identity, and her expectation of constructing a spiritual home of multi-cultural integration.

Keywords: Interpreter of Maladies, diaspora women, identity, postcolonial feminism, Jhumpa Lahiri

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri is a well-known contemporary Indian-American writer. Her works include: *Interpreter of Maladies*, *The Namesake*, *Unaccustomed Earth*, etc, which mainly describe the wandering plight of the diaspora and their identity pursuit. *Interpreter of Maladies* is Lahiri's debut novel. After its publication in 1999, it attracted widespread attention and won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature and the Hemingway Prize in 2000. There are nine stories in this collection, mainly about the lives of ethnic minorities immigrating to foreign countries. With her delicate writing style, rich writing emotion and simple narration, Lahiri's novel resonates with readers greatly.

Postcolonial feminism theory is the product of postcolonial and feminist theories. On the one hand, it criticizes some white people for ignoring differences in race and class; on the other hand, it opposes male hegemony. This article attempts to analyze the identity's transformation and formation for diaspora women in three short stories of *Interpreter of Maladies* from the perspective of postcolonial feminism: "A Real Durwan", "Mrs. Sen's", and "This Blessed House".

Boori Ma: A "Voiceless" Other

"A Real Durwan" is the first story in *Interpreter of Maladies* setting diaspora woman as the protagonist, which tells Boori Ma, an elderly refugee from Bangladesh to Calcutta, becomes a gatekeeper in an old-fashioned building. She works with due diligence, but she is ruthlessly driven out by residents due to an unsealed theft incident in the building.

"Diaspora identity" in the postcolonial context refers to the cultural identity and characteristics of the diaspora. It is not an essential existence, but in a dynamic process of identity construction (Zhao, 2015). Said points out in *Orientalism*: "Identity is by no means a static thing, but an artificially constructed historical, social, academic and political process, like competitions involved with different individuals and institutions in society" (Said, 1999). Cultural identities are in constant flux of construction and adjustment.

First of all, Boori Ma is the other in the family. The novel highlights her unfortunate family life from the contrast between her words to her appearance and behavior. Boori Ma always says: "We married her to a school principal. The rice was cooked in rosewater. The mayor was invited... At our house, we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish. A man came to pick our dates and guavas. Another man clipped hibiscus" (Lahiri, 1999). Boori Ma's words show that she has a prominent family background and lives a wealthy life. But in fact, at the age of 64, she is malnourished and thin, in a worrisome state of health. When climbing stairs, she has to put one hand on her knee, which is swollen and painful in the rainy season. She always holds a broom habitually, because "she never felt quite herself without it" (Lahiri, 1999), which shows that she isn't valued by her husband and children at home, and belongs to the other status. The inconsistency of words and deeds makes residents mistrust her.

Secondly, it's difficult for Boori Ma to integrate into local residents' life although she has worked in the building for many years. When visiting residents' homes, she knows that she can't sit on the furniture. She squats at the door or in the corridor, observing other people's faces and behaviors, fearing her behaviors might cause residents' displeasure. Boori Ma is never treated as a friend or a guest by the residents, but a marginalized person living at the bottom of society. And what drives her out of their life is a series of thefts after the renovation of building. Residents believe that it is all Boori Ma's fault. She tries to explain, but the tenants don't give her a chance, and follow the advice of an old man: "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. What a building like this needs is a real durwan" (Lahiri, 1999). At last, Boori Ma is kicked out of the building without people hearing her explanation. In short, Boori Ma is "talking to herself" from beginning to end, telling her own story. Her identity changes from the other in the family to the other in the old-fashioned building after her fleeing to India. In the story, she has been talking about the past and immerses herself in her imaginary beautiful world. On the one hand, it contrasts with the misfortune of her real life. On the other hand, her words also cause the building residents' dislike and distrust to her. In the end, after the theft incident, the residents no longer give her opportunity to speak. Thereby, Boori Ma is a "voiceless" other who is not only neglected in the family, but also cannot be heard by others in the foreign country.

Mrs. Sen's: A Brave Identity Reconstructor

"Mrs. Sen" is the second story in *Interpreter of Maladies* with a diaspora female as the protagonist, which tells an Indian-American housewife, Mrs. Sen's life, who immigrates to the United States with her husband and temporarily hosts an American boy, Eliot.

As an Indian who immigrates to the United States, Mrs. Sen has difficulty in accepting American culture at first, which is manifested in her cooking. Although it only exists her husband and herself at home, Mrs. Sen spends a lot of time cooking Indian dishes. She loves cooking and eating fish because people eat fish everyday in her homeland. For Mrs. Sen, her hobby of buying and eating fish, and her cooking style are ways for preserving

her national identity. However, because of fear, Mrs Sen is initially reluctant to drive to get the fish. Her trepidation about driving is emblematic of the fear of a cultural encounter between “self” and “other”. When Mrs. Sen first arrives in the United States, she regards its culture as the “other” and adheres to her hometown’s cultural customs. But for residents, driving is a necessary life skill due to America’s vast territory. Owing to Mrs. Sen’s rejection of driving, she has not been able to integrate into local life. Secondly, Mrs. Sen’s fondness for things full of Indian characteristics also slows down her “cultural adjustment process”, which is the process of “acceptance and adaptation to the local culture, language and way of life” (Esman, 2009). She decorates her American houses like those in her hometown to express miss for her hometown. And she also maintains traditional Indian femininity in her attire: even at a hot August afternoon, she wears an inappropriately shimmering white sari. Therefore, Mrs. Sen’s living habits prevents her from accepting the new culture.

Owing to the traditional concept of the patriarchal society, Mrs. Sen is at a subordinate position in the family. First of all, she has no independent career with her daily work revolving around family. Even though Mr. Sen treats her with indifference, she still serves the family wholeheartedly: cleaning the house, preparing exquisite dishes and waiting for her husband to come home. She is the traditional “angel in the house”. Secondly, Mrs. Sen has been in a state of “aphasia” for a long time. When she is wronged at home, she can only cry and talk to herself, but cannot really express her grief. Even after Mr. Sen comes to Mrs. Sen and Eliot’s car accident scene, he just “patted Eliot’s head”, and says “The policeman says you were lucky. Very lucky to come out without a scratch” (Lahiri, 1999). Instead of showing concern to his wife, Mr. Sen mocks his wife’s poor driving skills to an unfamiliar boy. After returning home, Mrs. Sen could only hide in the room and cry. It can be seen that Mr. Sen neither considers Mrs. Sen’s physical health nor psychological feelings after the car accident, and only regards Mrs. Sen as the identity symbol of his wife. In a patriarchal society, when women face the indifference and oppression of men, they choose silence and tolerance, which makes them unable to express their grievances.

In the end, Mrs. Sen realizes if she wants to change her situation, she must actively accept American culture: learning to drive, so as to gain independence in family life and increase her opportunity to communicate with others in the future. Thereby, after Mr. Sen refuses to take the fish, Mrs. Sen musters up her courage to make a revolutionary move: driving to take the fish. This act enhances people’s mobility and enables Mrs. Sen to move from “self culture” to “other culture”. Although her first road accident causes a certain trauma, it at least saves Mrs. Sen from the vicious circle of escape and brings her into the local cultural realm, which plays a crucial role in her building a new cultural identity and embracing American life. So Mrs. Sen is a brave identity reconstructor.

Twinkle: A Representative of “Hybrid” Identity

“This Blessed House” is the third story in *Interpreter of Maladies* with a diaspora female as the protagonist. It tells the story of Twinkle and Sanjeev, a young couple who have been married for four months and move into their new home in America. Their move is seen as a movement of “immigrant assimilation” because their new home is full of American culture elements: “christian art”, left by the previous home owner.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha proposes a “third space”: “neither this (self) nor that (other), but something outside”, that is, “a blurred hybrid space, revealing the liminality of cultural identity with racial, class and cultural tradition differences” (1994). “Hybridity” is an intermediate state, meaning one person stands between two cultural spaces. It isn’t a static condition, but a “positive, exciting force propelling the individual in

the direction of productivity” (Tyson, 2006). Hybrid identity can embrace diversity and accept the contradictory of different cultures. Although Twinkle is westernized as an Indian, but she doesn't have misunderstanding and prejudice against these two cultures.

The formation of Twinkle “hybrid” identity is first manifested in her exploration and acceptance of western culture. In her daily life, she flips through sonnets while taking bath and takes Irish poets as her graduate thesis themes. She drinks and smokes, showing the openness and boldness of American women. Besides, she explores and displays Christian crafts in her new home, which reflects her embrace of multiculturalism. When she finds Christian artwork in her home, she gets excited and exhibits her appreciation by placing artwork on the mantelpiece. Thereby, Twinkle is trying to get closer to the “hybrid” state. Secondly, she adheres to her national identity in the western environment. At the housewarming banquet, Twinkle wears the Indian characteristic costume “Sari Kameez” to present guests her cultural identity. When the guest asks, “Do you believe in Christ?” because of the plaster statue of Christ outside the house, Twinkle replies, “No, we're not Christian. We are good little Hindus” (Lahiri, 1999). Therefore, in the fusion of Indian and American cultures, Twinkle not only accept the developed country's culture, but also chose to hold fast to her homeland's.

As a minority woman, Twinkle's hybrid identity isn't always acknowledged by Americans and her husband. Before meeting Sanjeev, Twinkle is abandoned by her American boyfriend and cannot walk into the “central space” of Americans. After marriage, her hybrid state makes Sanjeev feel uncomfortable, because as first generation immigrant, he hasn't been able to accept American culture generously and frighten that others would forget his Indian identity. So he says bluntly to Twinkle who wants to keep the plaster-made Christ that he will throw it away: “Yes I can. I will” (Lahiri, 1999). Twinkle does not show weakness to her husband who has lived under the patriarchal system for a long time, but has courage to defend her rights: “This is our house, we own it together. The statue is a part of our property” (Lahiri, 1999). Through communication and negotiation, both sides finally reach a compromise. Thus, Twinkle's equal female subject identity has been constructed. At the banquet, when Sanjeev's American colleagues joke about her name, Twinkle resolves the embarrassment and ridicule with her wisdom, reflecting her confident and optimistic personality. At the end of the story, Twinkle is widely welcomed by the guests and lead the party atmosphere successfully. Thereby, Twinkle's hybrid identity is recognized by Americans and her husband at last. And her voice is heard by others.

Conclusion

This essay interprets three diaspora women's identities according to the writing sequence of *Interpreter of Maladies*. Due to their different life experiences, different characteristics are manifested for their formation of the cultural identities: Boori Ma changes from the “other” in the family to the “other” in the old-fashioned building, is a woman whose inner voice cannot be heard by others; Mrs. Sen is a brave identity reconstructor who switches from escaping to active accepting Western culture, from relying on men to resisting; and Twinkle becomes a representative of “hybrid” identity who moves from the marginal zone to the “center” of society.

For the shaping of these three women, the latter's identity establishment presents a positive and progressive state compared to the former, conveying Lahiri's yearning for the construction of positive cultural identities for diaspora women like her. Ethnic minorities leave their original living conditions and arrive in another country, experiencing pain, but looking forward to rebirth. This is not only the living strategy of the younger generation of

immigrants in different places, but also delivers Lahiri's idea about constructing a spiritual home of cultural integration in the open space.

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