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## **LAYERED FEMALE IDENTITIES IN MRS. DUTTA WRITES A LETTER, MRS. SEN'S AND WINTERSCAPE**

**Keywords:** migration, epistolary fiction, self-assertion, subversion, self-confessions, ambivalence

**Abstract:** The paper focuses on the function of letters and letter-writing in three short stories written by Indian American authors. Starting from the assumption that dependant female immigrants find it more difficult to adjust to a new culture, I will discuss the way in which letters mediate the characters' experience of estrangement by performing roles of homeland connectors and markers of definitive ruptures. The core of my analysis is the short story entitled *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. In this piece of fiction letters are central mechanisms of character construction. They reflect an old female immigrant's dilemma when confronted with American realities. At the same time, the presence of mental letters signals the ambiguous process of filtering cultural values. Letters in the form of self-confessions reflect the intricate negotiations that take place in the context of cultural encounters. The paper also makes references to *Mrs. Sen's* by Jhumpa Lahiri and *Winterscape* by Anita Desai. The aim of the paper is to compare and contrast the role of letters in fiction by Indian American female writers. The theoretical background of the present discussion refers to Indian immigration to North America, women's fiction and immigration, the function of letter-writing in literature by female authors.

### **Introduction**

The paper analyses three short stories by three different Indian American female writers: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Anita Desai. I have chosen these pieces of fiction because they present a series of similarities in point of female identity construction in the context of immigration to North America. The authors themselves share the experience of displacement, belonging to Indian communities in America. My analysis focuses on the role of letters in recording the female immigrant experience. I will discuss the clashes of values implied by the contact with a new culture along with the fragmentary nature of recording this process via letter-writing. I correlate the idea of layered identity with the stages of letter-writing that illustrate the female immigrant's reaction to the new environment. The paper concentrates on *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter*, with brief references to *Mrs. Sen's* and *Winterscape*. I will rely on theories of Indian migration, the function of epistolary forms in women's fiction and the role of such literary creations in understanding real-life aspects of immigration.

### **Dependant Female Immigrants**

One of the thematic similarities of the short stories analysed is that their main characters are dependant female immigrants. Their arrival into a new country is a matter of family reunification, rather than individual determination to leave India. Mrs. Dutta is a widow who comes to the United States to live with her son's family. Mrs. Sen is a professor's wife who has come to America to accompany her husband. The women in *Winterscape* are sisters who have come to Canada to visit their son, respectively nephew without an intention of settling there. According to Nita Shah, women belonging to recent immigration waves find it difficult to integrate themselves into the host culture: "An unassimilable segment of society, they are impeded by poor communication skills [...] the women even more so than the men" (quoted in Grewal 98). Given the fact that the characters' condition of dependency emphasizes

their feelings of isolation, I will investigate the function of letters as ways of dealing with the challenges of displacement via migration. I will also take into account the fact that female immigrants' adjustment to a new culture should be regarded as a consequence of a pre-emigration state of mind that prescribes culture-specific ideas of womanhood (Pandurang 91).

### **Letter-writing and self-discovery**

Letter-writing is a central device of character construction in *Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter*. This present chapter analyses the function of letters in the process of female immigrant self-discovery. As the title suggests, the process of writing a letter underlies Mrs. Dutta's experiences in her son's family. Actually, the impulse of writing is caused by the fact that Mrs. Dutta receives one letter from her friend in India. Mrs. Roma Basu, the sender, wants to know whether Sagar's mother is happy in America. In the beginning, the answer seems very simple to Mrs. Dutta, but she gradually changes her ideas about happiness. The writing of the letter becomes more difficult than imagined, as it forces the woman to disentangle the confusing new experiences: "Oh, this new country, where all the rules are upside down, it's confusing her" (Divakaruni 28). The short story describes the difficult process of writing a real letter that can faithfully render Mrs. Dutta's life abroad. Overwhelmed by new impressions, the character needs a preparatory stage of letter-writing in order to make sense of what goes on around her.

### **The initial actual letter**

Soon after receiving news from Mrs. Basu, Mrs. Dutta writes a first letter that contains her fresh impressions after arrival. The author inserts this letter towards the end of the short story. This strategy is meant to offer a contrast between the character's different dispositions in the beginning and at the end of her stay in America. The initial letter expresses an unambiguously optimistic attitude. Sagar's mother is happy to be with her family. She counts on old women's ability to adjust as a means to get accustomed with the American life-style:

Dear Roma, although I miss you, I know you will be pleased to hear how happy I am in America. There is much here that needs getting used to, but we are no strangers to adjusting, we old women. After all, haven't we been doing it all our lives? (Divakaruni 32).

Other sources of happiness are cooking Indian food to the family, getting to know her grandchildren, spending time with Sagar and secretly admiring her daughter-in-law's emancipation. This serene attitude expresses Mrs. Dutta's feelings at the beginning of her stay in America. Gradually, her disposition changes as she encounters American practices that contradict inherited beliefs.

The next section of the paper focuses on the role of imaginary epistolary confessions in the female immigrant's attempts to make sense of a new culture.

### **Writing to oneself – Mental letters and self-discovery**

One notices how letter-writing functions as a means of self-analysis; this aspect is proven by the fact that Mrs. Dutta hesitates to write the final letter. The reason she postpones and reformulates her impressions is because she is confused by her experiences in America. The letter-writing process expresses her doubts about the new values encountered. Consequently, the story contains several "mental letters", i.e. thoughts rendered in the form of imaginary letters. Campbell analyses the role of letters in women's epistolary fiction. She considers that letters that are written, but not sent stand for a process of self-discovery:

Once the letters are begun, the writers seem to be speaking to themselves, and, though the reader is ever-present, the writer becomes immersed in a discovery of herself. (Questia Online Library).

The fact that these thoughts are never given the shape of a concrete letter illustrates their self-examination function. Before writing the final letter, Mrs. Dutta talks to herself about life in the new country. She tries to make sense of everything, before communicating a final judgment to Roma Basu. In the first letter of the mind, Mrs. Dutta expresses her nostalgia for home: "Oh, Roma, I miss it all so much, sometimes I feel that someone has reached in and torn out a handful of my chest" (Divakaruni 8). Still, the old woman tries to focus on positive aspects. Therefore, the tonality of her next imaginary letter changes as she speaks about the satisfaction of cooking Indian food for her loved ones:

At least the family's eating well since I arrived, she writes in her mind, proper Indian food, ruti that puff up the way they should, fish curry in mustard sauce, and real pulao with raisins and cashews and ghee-the way you taught me, Roma, instead of Rice-a-roni (Divakaruni 9).

The next event that makes Mrs. Dutta add a new section to her imaginary letters is her successful subversion of her-daughter-in-law's rules. The old woman tries to use the washing machine, but she is too scared by technology and cannot turn on the device. Thus, she washes her clothes by hand and then she secretly dries them on a clothesline in the garden. She does that because she cannot stand keeping the laundry in "the same room where she kept the pictures of her gods. That brought bad luck" (Divakaruni 14). This small "victory" makes the old woman feel enthusiastic and gives her the feeling she can adjust to the new realities:

In her mind she writes to Mrs. Basu, I'm fitting so well here, you'd never guess I came only two months back. I've found new ways of doing things, of solving problems creatively. You would be most proud if you saw me (Divakaruni 17).

One of the scenes that best illustrates Mrs. Dutta's different cultural assumptions is her encounter with the American female neighbour. When Mrs. Dutta hangs her clothes, she sees the neighbour across the fence. The Indian woman's impulse is to communicate with her. But her attempts to make contact are impeded by the American's indifference. Interestingly, Mrs. Dutta cannot conceive that the woman does not want to talk to her. She tries to account for the neighbour's silence by invoking a presumable inability to move that keeps her inside the house. At the same time, Mrs. Dutta is aware of certain cultural assumptions that clash with her attempts to initiate conversation:

Perhaps she is not well? Mrs. Dutta feels sorry for her, alone in her illness in a silent house with only cigarette for solace and she wishes the etiquette of America had not prevented her from walking over with a word of cheer and a bowl of her fresh-cooked alu dum (Divakaruni 23).

Later on, she realizes that the neighbour is not ill, but annoyed at Mrs. Dutta's hanging the clothes over the fence. Shyamoli is the one who receives the complaint. This event acts as a trigger of Shyamoli's frustrations. The young woman has the impression that Mrs. Dutta has taken over the authority in the family. She feels excluded and talks to Sagar about her feelings. Mrs. Dutta is outraged by the young woman's sense of revolt. She writes another fragment in her imaginary letter, expressing adherence to a more obedient ideal of femininity:

Women need to be strong, not react to every little thing like this. You and I, Roma we had far worse to cry about, but we shed our tears invisibly. We were good wives and daughters-in-law, good mothers. Dutiful, uncomplaining. Never putting ourselves first. (Divakaruni 27)

However, despite her commitment to this ideal, Mrs. Dutta has come to question her own system of values while staying in America. One can witness her indecisiveness mirrored in the way she wavers between opposite dispositions. Thus, her praise of female submissiveness is followed by ideas that

express appreciation of women's rebelliousness. Mrs. Dutta realizes that Shyamoli's lesson of self-assertion may actually be valuable:

And what good did it do? The more we bent, the more people pushed us, until one day we'd forgotten that we could stand up straight. Maybe Shyamoli's doing the right thing, after all... (Divakaruni 28).

Mrs. Dutta's self-confessions in the form of imaginary letters express ambivalent reflections. In the next section I will focus on the liberating potential of these mental letters in relation to female assertiveness.

### Letters as freeing agents

The act of postponing the writing of a final letter is related to the character's hesitation and need to process the phenomena encountered. Another significance of the imaginary confessions is that they enable Mrs. Dutta to select the content of what she chooses to communicate. Letter-writing becomes a channel of meditating upon disturbing aspects, while concealing them from a potential letter-reader:

Women as writers in epistolary fiction open up their consciousness in letters because the form, with its distancing yet mediatory nature, frees the writer to say what she cannot say in the presence of the addressee (Questia Online Library).

In one of the imaginary letters, Sagar's mother criticizes the excessive TV watching in her son's family:

*Really, Roma, she writes in her head as she feels her way along the unlighted corridor, the amount of TV they watch here is scandalous. The children, too, sitting for hours in front of that box [...] and then talking back when I tell them to turn it off* (Divakaruni 28, original emphasis).

Mrs. Dutta is divided between loyalty to her family and her own dissatisfaction with their American life-style. Although she wants to share her feelings with Mrs. Basu, Mrs. Dutta cannot openly admit her disappointment. In the beginning of her stay, the woman is reluctant to face her own feelings:

And so, she has been putting off her reply while in her heart family loyalties battle with insidious feelings of – but she turns from them quickly and will not name them even to herself (Divakaruni 5).

Torn between these different attitudes, she gradually finds a certain comfort by way of writing letters in her mind. This is why, after criticizing her grandchildren, she realizes there are certain things she cannot write about, but which she has to say in order to feel better: "Of course, she will never put such blasphemy into a real letter. Still, it makes her feel better to say it, if only to herself" (Divakaruni 29).

On the other hand, despite her criticisms of American ways, the old woman modifies some of her beliefs while staying there. The most important aspect of her change refers to the inherited model of womanhood. Before coming to America, Mrs. Dutta lived on her own, as a widow, enjoying the benefits of solitude. Her experiences in Sagar's house contribute to a further change of her perspective with respect to women's roles. Through Shyamoli, the old woman is faced with a different model of womanhood that impresses her. Although Mrs. Dutta believes that a woman is defined mostly in relation to others (as a mother, daughter-in-law and wife), there are instances when her behavior illustrates a more individualistic conception of identity. While looking at her self in the mirror, Mrs. Dutta is proud that her hair is more beautiful than "her daughter-in-law's permed curls" (Divakaruni 6). Even though she considers this an act of vanity, Sagar's mother cannot help indulging in self-admiration. During Sagar and Shyamoli's fight Mrs. Dutta decides to ignore the conflict and write her letter. Although she knows it would be better to wait until things settle down, she seems to give priority to her own matters: "But a

restlessness or is it defiance has taken hold of her. She's sorry Shyamoli is upset, but why should she have to waste her evening because of that?" (Divakaruni 28).

Finally, Mrs. Dutta realizes she does not belong with her son and his family. I interpret her decision of going back to India as the ultimate gesture of self-assertion. During the couple's argument over the clothes incident, the old woman realizes she feels "alone and unnecessary" in "this land of young people" (Divakaruni 33). Ironically, while her decision to come to America is dictated by an Indian norm – a widow's place is with her son's family – her decision to go back to India seems to be motivated by a sense of personal desire. Mrs. Dutta is afraid of the community reaction to her return; once again, she judges the consequences of her acts through the eyes of others. She knows that her relatives will interpret her return as a failure to find her place in Sagar's family. She also thinks of "what she owes to Sagar" (Divakaruni 33). While assessing the consequences of her acts through the perspective of others, Mrs. Dutta also wonders about what "she owes to herself" (Divakaruni 33). This fact proves that her experience in America awakened a latent sense of individuality. Despite the fact that "all the certainties she trusted in collapsed upon themselves like imploded stars" (Divakaruni 33), the old woman has come to understand where she truly belongs. Contrary to her initial belief that placed a widow in a position of dependence, Mrs. Dutta realizes that she wants to live in India on her own. The story significantly ends with Mrs. Dutta's actual letter that registers her change and the beginning of a new learning process. The next section will analyse the character's actual letter that sums up her experiences.

### **The actual letter**

Mrs. Dutta's letters of the mind are intermediate stages in the process of understanding her reactions to a new experience. They involve a sense of confusion and reluctance to accept unpleasant truths. They are acts of censoring inconvenient aspects from a potential addressee. These mental epistolary forms express the character's struggle to define herself in a new context. Mrs. Dutta's actual letter sums up the results of her attempts to find happiness. Her confessions formulate an ironical definition of certainty, i.e. she only knows that everything she believed in is no longer valid:

Dear Roma, Mrs Dutta writes, I cannot answer your question about whether I am happy for I am no longer sure I know what happiness is. All I know is that it isn't what I thought it would be (Divakaruni 33).

The fact that the old woman can only provide negative definitions for what she seems to have discovered illustrates the need to reconstruct her system of values. She is still placed in an intermediary phase: between giving up old notions and trying to find new equivalents. Her short cultural transplantation has cast doubts on familiar ways and cultural assumptions. She now conceives happiness in different terms: a denial of familiar ideas of dependence and a distinct, yet unspecified conception of love:

[Happiness] is not about being needed. It isn't about being with family either. It has something to do with love, I still think that, but in a different way than I believed earlier, a way I don't have words to explain (Divakaruni 33).

The woman is aware of the change within herself, but she cannot account for it completely. She realizes she is about to start a new journey of self discovery back home. Happiness itself becomes less important than the process of shaping one's beliefs and understanding where one belongs. This is what Mrs. Dutta attempts to do after her homecoming:

Perhaps we can figure it out together, two old women drinking cha in your downstairs flat [...] If I'm lucky – and perhaps, in spite of all that has happened, I am- the happiness will be in the figuring out (Divakaruni 34).

Thus, by writing a final letter Mrs. Dutta clarifies one aspect: the feelings of belonging. With all its intricacies, the experience in America has made her realize that she feels happy on her own in India, rather than with Sagar in America.

The next section of the paper focuses on letter-writing and the condition of isolation implied by migration. Letter-writing may assuage the feelings of alienation and provide a sense of comfort to dependant female immigrants.

### **Letter-writing and isolation**

According to Campbell, the process of writing in order to better understand oneself is also a consequence of feeling isolated:

The letter writer in epistolary fiction is usually isolated, especially in novels in which there is no exchange of letters, and very often when there is an exchange. In fact, the isolation of the writer is essential to the epistolary urge (Questia Online Library).

The experience of immigration involves a degree of alienation that all the characters analysed have to face. There are several instances when the character alludes to the isolation she feels in the new country that seems deserted when compared to the Indian cityscape:

It's been a good day, as good as it can be in a country where you might stare out the window for hours and not see one living soul. No vegetable vendors with wicker baskets on their heads, no knife-sharpeners calling scissors-knives-choppers, scissors-knives-choppers to bring the children running (Divakaruni 20).

She tries to find comfort in cooking and through (failed) attempts to communicate with her neighbour. The short time she can spend with her son talking about his childhood is also a way of finding solace. Her inner epistolary meditations can be also interpreted as ways of dealing with loneliness. The following chapter analyses the role of letters in *Mrs. Sen's* and *Winterscape*. Although they are not dominant themes, letters are mentioned as important connections between immigrants and India.

### **Letters as forms of incomplete communication**

In *Mrs. Sen's and Winterscape*, letters are not central elements as in Divakaruni's short story. They primarily function as means of maintaining connections between immigrants and their Indian relatives. In Mrs. Sen's case the dislocation from India is perceived more acutely in comparison with the other characters analysed. The woman feels very isolated in a country where people do not seem to communicate properly: "Here, in this place where Mr. Sen has brought me, I cannot sometimes sleep in so much silence" (Lahiri 115) or "If I began to scream right now at the top of my lungs, would someone come?" (116). For Mrs. Sen, letters are as important as food in preserving continuity with India: "Two things [...] made Mrs. Sen happy. One was the arrival of a letter from her family" (Lahiri 121). "The other thing that made Mrs. Sen happy was fish from the sea" (Lahiri 123). The woman is always excited to get a letter. Letters are important means of receiving vital news concerning family events from India (such as births, deaths). In the same time, this type of connection reinforces the sense of an irreversible break with the native land. Thus, the woman is deeply frustrated by her inability to take part in community matters. While providing an important link with India, letters remind Mrs. Sen of the physical barrier between her and the country of origin. She is painfully aware of the temporal distance that alienates her from the loved-ones left behind:

Mrs. Sen took the aerogram from India out of her purse and studied the front and back. She unfolded it and re-read it to herself, sighing every now and then [...] "my sister has had a baby girl. By the time I see her, depending if Mr.Sen gets his tenure, she will be three years old. *Her own aunt will be a*

*stranger. If we sit side by side on a train she will not know my face* (Lahiri 122) (my emphasis).

In *Winterscape*, too, letters function as forms of incomplete communication between Rakesh and his two female relatives. They are messages about and reactions to important events in Rakesh's life (his career, his personal life, his wife's pregnancy). In this story, women are pictured mostly as recipients of letters from Canada. They are dissatisfied with the fragmentariness of Rakesh's letters. Their estrangement from Rakesh is highlighted by the broken connection they maintain through letters that convey superficial impressions. At some point, Asha and Annu are frustrated by the scarcity of information Rakesh provides about his future wife:

Rakesh did not tell them how old she was, what family she came from, what schooling she had had, when was the wedding, should they come, and other such particulars of importance to them. Rakesh, *when he wrote, managed to avoid almost all such particulars*, mentioning only that the wedding would be small, merely an official matter of registration at the town hall, they need not trouble to come-as they ventured to suggest (Desai 39, my emphasis).

In this case, too, letters stand for the disconnection with one's past in the immigration process. Communication via letters cannot faithfully render the experience abroad for the relatives in India. Thus, "Rakesh's dutiful, although not very informative letters over the years" (Desai 38) fail to address the matter of the tough Canadian winter which the two women will later experience.

## Conclusion

Letter-writing performs several roles in the stories analysed. In Mrs. Dutta's case, letters function mainly as means of reflecting upon and clarifying a confusing experience. The character writes two actual letters, while the rest are personal meditations in the shape of mental letters. This suggests that the letters' role as connectors to India is a pretext for allowing the female immigrant to confront her doubts regarding life in America. While writing to herself, Mrs. Dutta is able to both criticise and take over aspects from the new culture. The selective content of the imaginary letters and the character's hesitation to write a real one illustrate the impossibility to fully comprehend an alien culture. In *Mrs. Sen's*, letters function as incomplete way of communication. They point out the woman's need to maintain home connections as a remedy for her profound isolation in America. Mrs. Sen differs from the other characters analysed in that she does not have the option to return to India. In her case, letters emphasize the drama of dislocation and her failure to adjust to a new society. In "Winterscape", the Indian women are frustrated by the incomplete nature of Rakesh's letters. Their selective content prevents Asha and Anu from getting an accurate perspective on their son/nephew's life in Canada. In the same way as in *Mrs. Sen's*, letters emphasize the feeling of rupture between the immigrant and what he /she has left behind. Still, in *Winterscape* the Indian women's alienation in Canada is assuaged by the fact that, unlike Mrs. Sen, they may choose to go back home. In all three cases, letters function ambiguously: they are both connectors and marks of separation, illustrating the layered construction of immigrant identities.

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