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Embracing or Defying:

The Consequences Mrs. Sen and Shoba Face From Their Reaction to Society's Gender Norms

The socially constructed gender norms of society, which are perpetuated on individuals, outline specifically how they should respond to grief depending on their gender. Throughout Jhumpa Lahiri's book *Interpreter of Maladies*, the short stories "A Temporary Matter" and "Mrs. Sen's" demonstrate both a perfect embracement and defiance of these gender norms when grieving through the characters Shoba and Mrs. Sen, revealing the multitude of responses within individual grieving despite the pressure for a socially constructed response and the consequences that can occur from choosing to follow society's expectations or not. In "A Temporary Matter," Shoba's rejection of the traditional feminine way of grieving over the loss of her stillborn child defies society's gender norms and directly contrasts her husband, Shukumar's distinctly more feminine response to the death. Ultimately, Shoba's rejection of her gender role allows her a path of grieving that will likely lead to flourishing in the future, despite the blow her relationship takes following the death of their child. Conversely, in "Mrs. Sen's," Mrs. Sen, unlike Shoba, completely embraces feminine gender expectations after immigrating to the United States. While accepting this role allows Mrs. Sen to cope with the grief of losing her home country and identity, her ability to create a new identity in her new home diminishes significantly, ultimately revealing a negative consequence to embracing society's gender norms. Inside these two stories, Shoba and Mrs. Sen reveal drastically different reactions to grieving situations and how either

adopting or defying society's gender norms can complicate one's life. Through their experiences, Lahiri demonstrates a multitude of responses to grief and the results that can occur when the individual adheres to, or not, society's expectations for their specific gender.

Throughout "A Temporary Matter," Shoba rejects society's expectations of how she, as both a woman and a mother, should grieve over the loss of her child, while her husband Shukumar demonstrates perfectly how society says Shoba should be responding, which ultimately causes strain in their deteriorated relationship. After giving birth to a stillborn child, Shoba and Shukumar have drastically different reactions to the loss, reversing the gender roles society has expected them to enact. Shukumar, on one hand, is a stay at home student, spending his days cooking and cleaning the house while studying for his degree. After their child's death, he is severely depressed and cannot get out of bed, barely maintaining basic hygiene and finding solace by spending time in what was to be their baby's nursery. Conversely, Shoba is entirely the opposite: she cannot stay still and becomes the 'breadwinner' of the family, finding comfort in staying busy and working longer hours at her office job. Rather than seeking emotional support and taking time to grieve the death in a "feminine" way, Shoba rejects any sense of the womanly aspects that society's gender expectations rely on her to take part in. She immediately begins blocking out the loss, using her work and the gym to make her busy, seemingly moving on from her child's death. And yet, six months after the loss, Shukumar is still stuck in bed, depressed and mentally blank, unable to do little more than clean and cook. Shoba is the one who picks herself up and moves forward in her life, leaving Shukumar feeling left behind and their relationship's future looking bleak. While he lays in bed, unable to get up, Shoba is downtown "sipping her third cup of coffee already" searching "for typographical errors in textbooks" (Lahiri 4). Shukumar envies her ability to work, as he is only a "mediocre student" that now

“lie[s] in their bed until he gr[ows] bored” (4). Shoba’s ability to maintain a productive, orderly schedule instead of embracing society’s gender norms, that *she* should be the one stuck in bed with no hope for her future, is what saves her. In their relationship, Shoba and Shukumar completely reverse their gender roles and while Shukumar is stuck paralyzed and falling apart, Shoba has not let this become her. Whether this is healthy or not may be debated, but it is clear that this ability of Shoba’s, to move on and take on what society says is a more dominating “male” role in grieving, is what keeps her life productive and allows her a bright future.

Many critics have reflected on the nature of Shoba and Shukumar’s relationship, studying their reversal of gender roles and how Shoba’s defiance of hers gives her the strength to move on after a devastating blow. In a “Short Stories for Students” criticism on “A Temporary Matter,” author Candyce Norvell states that in their relationship “Shoba [is] in the driver’s seat,” having “the strength and determination to restart her life” while Shukumar is a “passive victim of those same circumstances” (Norvell 216). While it is traditionally expected that women will be the “passive victim,” emotionally distraught and paralyzed inside grief, in Shukumar and Shoba’s relationship it is quite the opposite. Shoba is the one who takes initiative to change and move on in her life, while Shukumar does not have the “strength and determination” necessary to “restart.” Rather than take on a traditionally male role in his grieving, Shukumar acts in the way that Shoba is expected to act, defying societal gender norms. In all, it is Shoba’s rejection of these norms that have allowed her to move on in her life, whether it is with Shukumar or not. If she were to embrace these norms, she very well could have a different lifestyle, one similar to Shukumar and characterized by intense, suffocating grief. Instead, while taking on a more masculine way of grieving, Shoba is all the better for it and shows real hope for her future as she navigates a world post bereavement.

However, Lahiri also exemplifies another way of grieving by illustrating the effects of conforming to gender expectations through her character Mrs. Sen. In “Mrs. Sen’s,” Mrs. Sen reveals herself to be someone who leans into traditional female roles while dealing with the grief of leaving her home country. An Indian immigrant who has relocated to the United States with her husband, Mrs. Sen is very culturally involved and chooses to actively embrace her Indian heritage as a coping method for grief. She is plagued by intense longing for India and for much of the story, recounts the things she misses about it. When she moves to the United States, rather than taking on a new identity and growing with this new experience, Mrs. Sen heavily commits into performing the traditional womanly roles and responsibilities in order to hide from her grief. She becomes the ultimate homemaker, becoming known solely for her cooking. “Each afternoon” the story says, “she took whole vegetables between her hands and hacked them apart: cauliflower, cabbage, butternut squash”, creating elaborate dishes that was “merely dinner for herself and Mr. Sen” (Lahiri 112, 115). After moving to the United States, Mrs. Sen’s identity becomes her cooking, her homemaking. She physically hacks through her grief by cutting her vegetables, burying her emotions inside her cooking. Like Shoba, Mrs. Sen blocks out this grief by finding something else to keep her busy, though it is in a drastically different way: with Mrs. Sen embracing gender norms and Shoba defying them. When she moves to America, Mrs. Sen continues to relish in her cooking and lets it consume her. She has no desire to add to her new identity in America, being completely content with cooking as her sole identity. In addition, whenever Mrs. Sen is in trouble or needs to affirm her stature to anyone, she consistently responds to anyone that “Mr. Sen teaches mathematics at the university” (110). Saying this multiple times, it is clear that Mrs. Sen does not value herself as a complete person, relying majorly on her husband for guidance and assurance. Her husband is the “breadwinner,” much

like Shoba is in her family. Mrs. Sen becomes much like Shukumar does, paralyzed by her longing for the past and concerned only with her work in cooking and homemaking, traditional roles that society expects her to fulfill. She is mentally left behind, just like Shukumar, unable to cope with her reality and using her homemaking duties to give her some type of meaning in life. As such, while it does keep her culturally connected to her Indian heritage, it also prevents her from creating a new identity in her new home.

In Y.V. Sudha Devi's criticism of "Mrs. Sen's," she explores how Mrs. Sen's embracement of society's gender expectations serves as a coping mechanism for the grief she feels at losing her home country and identity. Rather than lean against these norms like Shoba does, Mrs. Sen chooses to align with traditional expectations, something that gives a negative consequence. Devi emphasizes Mrs. Sen's grieving process by stating that "Mrs. Sen's steadfast dedication to maintaining her cultural heritage," most notably the way she dresses traditionally feminine and maintains a homemaking way of life, is "a coping mechanism to provide her with a sense of continuity and belonging in a foreign place during the unsettling experience of migration" (Devi 256). Mrs. Sen "adheres to traditional female roles, such as being a homemaker and carer" in order to cope with the grief of immigrating, using this to block out her sadness and loss instead of adjusting to her new life in the United States. Rather than simply embracing these traditional gender norms, Mrs. Sen allows them to become her entire person, allowing her a "sense of continuity" but preventing her from creating a new identity, separate from her one when she was living in India. As such, embracing these gender norms gives Mrs. Sen a disastrous consequence, leaving her with no identity anymore outside of her homemaking duties.

Through Shoba and Mrs. Sen's experiences, Lahiri reveals two reactions to grief in very different ways, one that embraces the socially constructed gender norms of society, and the other

openly defying them. While Shoba rejects traditional feminine ways of grieving and aligns more with a male gendered expectation, she is able to move on from the death of her child and show true hope for her future. This way she does not remain paralyzed from the loss like her husband, Shukumar does. In "Mrs. Sen's," Mrs. Sen uses traditional feminine roles to hide from her grief, paralyzed from adjusting to change. She relies heavily on cooking and homemaking to fill the void in her life that has happened as a result of leaving and losing her home country. In this way, she embraces society's expectations of women, resulting in her inability to form a new identity after her immigration. She remains stuck and uses the cooking to connect to her past identity, leaving little hope for making a new identity after she immigrates. As such, Lahiri wonderfully illustrates two responses to grief that either align with society's expectations or not. Shoba's refusal to align with the gender norms society demands she occupy bring a positive consequence to her life while Mrs. Sen's embracement of these norms leaves her, like Shukumar, paralyzed without hope of adjusting to her new identity. Together, this reveals the consequences of grieving in accordance with society's expectations or not and emphasizes that in order to grow and prosper in one's life, one cannot seek comfort in cultural expectations of how one should act. After all, these are merely social constructs designed to dictate one's life depending on their gender.

Works Cited

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