

**UNHEARD VOICES: AN EXPLORATION OF SUBALTERN EXPERIENCES IN
JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT FICTION**

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Abstract

The human urge to move beyond the geographical limitations of his own nation seeking financial, political or intellectual enhancement of the self or the society is not a recent development. In fact, since time immemorial history is replete with such prospective voyages. The process of setting up colonies thereby dividing the colonizer and the colonized into two distinct sets of marks of individual identity is the outcome of the pioneering spirit of man to look beyond “home”. With the European powers voyaging round the globe to enhance their supremacy, all the other continents became their property- divided and subdivided amongst themselves. The rise of the concept of the ‘ruler; and the; ruled’ gave way to the creation of what we call as ‘other’. The subdued, dominated, under-privileged were coined under the term “subaltern” by Antonio Gramsci, to encapsulate into its ambit all those who have been denied their due as human beings on the basis of certain notions like race, colour, gender ,nationality. The subject of the subaltern is the agenda of almost all diasporic writers including Jhumpa Lahiri. This paper ensues to explore the subalterns in the select short stores of Jhumpa Lahiri from her collection The Interpreter of Maladies.

Key Words: Post Colonialism, Diaspora, Subaltern, Subjugated, Other, etc.

Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies is set in two distinct, culturally and geographically apart parts of the world- India and the United States of America. Born to Bengali parents and brought up in cosmopolitan culture, her stories raise complex issues like acculturation, contra-acculturation, etc. The indomitable urge of reverting back to something which form the core of the inherent tendencies of a race keep coming to an individual even though he or she might try to take refuge by assimilating to the culture of the ancestors' adopted country. However all differences cannot be obliterated and the universal tendency of subdividing the people into 'superiors' and 'inferiors' can in no situation be overlooked. The subaltern voice is vibrant and multifarious in the short stories of Jhumpa Lahiri. The dominant tendency or voice might try to crush, subdue or drub the voice of the other but in fact this voice sometimes appears louder than the rest.

Lahiri portrays the wretched condition of a deprived sweeper lady called Boorima within the story, a true Durwan, who does some household works for the inmates of an apartment and completely dependent on them for her livelihood. Her residing place may be a small space under the steps of that four storied building. Her properties are a quilt, a bucket and a bundle of broomsticks. She served as the 'durwan' (House Keeper) of the apartment. Nobody appointed her as a 'durwan' but she voluntarily offered helps to most the families therein complex and reciprocally received some food and clothing. She was

sixty- four years old and becoming physically weaker slowly but never fails to comb the two storied building twice each day. She often recollects the happy life she led together with her husband and four daughters in East Bengal (Bangladesh) and the way she lost it after the partition. As the commemoration of the past she still wore the keys of the Almira (a wooden case) in her sari ends, which serves her an exceptional consolation and bears witness of her stories. She tells these stories not to any one in particular but mostly to as way to remember her past glory. Moreover she feels that in her chores they served as a kind of comfort that would possibly relieve her pain. The inmates of the apartment never believed these stories. When they asked for details she would utter during a restless voice: “Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf? Believe me, don’t believe me. My life consists of such griefs you can’t even dream them” (43). Boorima patrolled the building in such rapidity that no new guest could escape her scanner eyes. The inmates were pleased at the presence of a Durwan inside their premises within the sort of Boorima and felt that their possessions were safe, though most of them had nothing expensive to be safeguarded. Though a refugee, Boorima isn’t an unwanted guest in any of these families living within the apartment. Some families like Dalals took her as one of their family members and extended their care and concern for the old lady. But when the renovation work of the building started she lost her habitat and therefore the relationship with the people within the apartment. First she shifted or was forced to shift her breathing place to the rooftop of the building. Then she slowly reduced her patrol and not even worried about her food. She wandered places without connecting to anybody especially. Finally her pathetic ending came fast when a robbery occurred within the apartment. She was accused of serving as an informer about the belongings to the outsiders. She prayed innocence but nobody believed her as they want to, for her stories. Boorima who lost all her family members in her country was happy to be related to the inmates of the apartment but lost them too to ‘modernisation’.

In When Mr.Pirzada Came to Dine, it’s again a Bangladeshi man, who tries to determine a rapport with an Indian family. He is indeed a professor of Botany in Dacca University who has come to US on a Pakistani Scholarship to pursue a search on the ‘foliage of latest England’. He is a husband with seven daughters who feels that he misses his family, especially during the troublesome period. His regular communication through letters has taken successful because the mail couldn’t function thanks to the continued riots. He was unable contact his family for the past six months.

His only solace therein foreign land was his new found relationship with Lilia’s family. Lilia’s family used to invite any Indian they’re available across in their vicinity, to their house and develop friendship with them and Pirzada was their new Indian friend. The elders within the family had their own reservation about Mr. Pirzada because he’s a Muslim and thus the family never forgets the partition. But the diminutive girl, Lilia and Pirzada delight in the company of each other and he often buys sweets to the lady of the house.

Mr Pirzada was in great quandary about his future because the Bangladesh (Bangladesh) is

fighting with the west. Reports about the riots disturbed him tons and his main purpose of the visit to Lilia's home is to observe the six thirty news which carried lists of men killed within the violence. Lilia had imagined that he dressed majestically each day because he might receive a nasty news and he wish to put a bold face thereon occasion. "I wondered if the rationale he was always so smartly dressed was in preparation to endure with dignity whatever news assailed him, maybe even to attend a funeral at a moment's notice" (24). During this era Lilia had developed an honest bonding with Pirzada and enjoyed his frequent visits. Her intimacy has gone to such an extent that she made it a routine to wish to for the security of his family before retiring to bed. The continued tension between India and Pakistan over the Bangladeshi incident culminated to the purpose of war. Subsequently Mr. Pirzada returned home to finish his long woe. Lilia's relations were a worried lot as there have been lot of stories about the riots and killings in Dacca. Even after his return to Dacca they heard nothing from Mr. Pirzada about him and his family. It's only after several months later, when Pirzada has sent a card that the relations of Lilia returned to normalcy.

In the world of emotional shortcomings an individual's daunting task to beat the emotional blackmailing, from the people surrounding her, is passionately told within the Treatment of Bibi Haldar. Bibi Haldar could also be a twenty nine year old unmarried girl, an orphan who lives under the care of her Cousin Haldar and his wife. She helps her cousin in preparing cosmetics for the shop he owns and reciprocally she is given food and shelter. She was suffering from an unidentified malady which her relatives and friends couldn't interpret and cure. Within the Indian scenario such maladies aren't uncommon and much of families have witnessed cases of 'hysterical women'. Bibi feels that she could also be a neglected woman and her feelings aren't respected by her relatives. She was considerably a homely girl who expresses her desire thus: "Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to need to shade my eyes, scent my hair? to boost a toddler and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?" (83).

Her neighbours did attempt to treat her as a traditional person thus trying to instill confidence in her. They took her for infrequent outings and purchased her whatever she wished. Within the Indian society the last remedy for such an undisclosed malady is marriage. Initially her neighbours were worried the thanks to convince her for a marriage. rather than refusing the proposal, Bibi was delighted by the diagnosis. But it's extremely difficult to hunt out a match for a over aged woman who isn't 'pretty', who speaks 'backwards', who don't skills to cook and moreover who is suffering from an ailment not known to anybody. Vexed by her unending ailment and futile attempts to urge her married, her cousin disowned her. He vacated the house leaving her back within the apartment with a meager amount. Bibi has put up a courageous face by declaring that it's better to gauge alone than with relatives who never appreciated her feelings. She did live alone away even from the eyes of her neighbours. She came out of her confidential hiding as a pregnant woman and gave birth to a son. What shocked most of the people was that she

happened to steer a very normal life, after becoming a mother with none symptoms of the malady. As is that the custom in India, the only retreatment for any malady is love and care. She has become a traditional person when she realised that there's a purpose to measure. She even indulged in her cousin's cosmetic business to feed her son.

The collections' first story, A short lived Matter analyses a marriage within the lights of Western culture . a lady leading a family, permitting the husband to pursue education can happen only during a western country. Again, a wife permitting her husband to attend a conference when she is nearing 'labour' is certainly a replacement thing to the Indian society. the sole Indianness about their marriage is that it had been arranged by their parents. Despite many shortcomings both Shukumar and Shoba did lead a traditional life. After the death of their unborn child, Shoba went into deep silence which disturbed Shukumar. He was struggling hard to re-establish their relationship. He did take benefit of the "power failure" nights and tried to bring back the intimacy. But Shoba reflecting the characteristics US environment breaks the news that she is moving faraway from him to a special apartment. within the Blessed House an uncaring husband disrespects the emotions of his wife within the name of religion . Sanjeev and Twinkle's marriage was a love marriage but actually he doesn't know what love is. Her childish curiosity unsettles him. Unaware to exhibit true love he searches answers from his beloved.

The subalterns we have visualized in these stories chiefly belong to the non-elite class. Woman, who is generally treated as the vulnerable other has been given substantial space in the stories of Jhumpa Lahiri. Mr. Pirzada does not belong to the economically weaker or politically vulnerable class in his own country. But in America, he is the 'other'. In The Interpreter of Maladies, we find a voice drubbed and unheeded. Twinkle seeks a way to escape and feel herself. In the case of Bibi Haldar, her subjugation is unfortunately encouraged by a woman in an advantageous pedestal. Bibi Haldar is a classic example of the victory of a woman who has dared to assert her rights. Her journey from a helpless relative to a successful mother is strategic and commendable.

As a writer of the diaspora, we find that Jhumpa Lahiri nowhere has taken sides in her quest to show the tussles that often emerge when the values and thoughts of the West and East intermingle with each other. Lilia's double identity- Indo-American has been intricately showcased. The heterogeneity of cultures of Mr.Pirzada and Lilia's parents disappear and Lilia could feel a homogenous coalescence of their worlds. The emergence of a composite culture is highlighted but the true values of the tales lie in the presentation of the western vision of Indian culture and how they perceive India. Lilia's identity crisis is the crisis of every subaltern. Recent Postcolonial studies have emphasized more upon the voices that often go unheard and uncared rather than the overtly heard or dominant voices. The political subaltern, the gendered subaltern all fight a single battle- the battle for a dignified existence by asserting themselves as equals with everybody. The creation of a society homogenous in essence therefore appears to be the propaganda behind every overt and covert struggle of the

subaltern. Jhumpa Lahiri's attempt, at least in the stories discussed, appears to be voicing these humane concerns with utmost positive sincerity.

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