



Women as Subalterns in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "A Real Durwan"

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Article History: Submitted 8 June 2021; Revised 11 July 2021; Accepted 10 August 2021

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjah.v3i2.39437>

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the hysteric tendencies, inconsistent speeches and silences of woman in Jhumpa Lahiri's two short stories "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "The Real Durwan." The paper addresses this objective through the application of subaltern perspective: subaltern cannot speak. More specifically, single, poor and helpless women's position and their inability to speak in need are analyzed in the light of subaltern studies. These two stories expose the issue of hysteric woman and an elderly street woman with different stories, respectively. The disadvantaged women's inability to speak – parallels the subaltern's inability to speak. This paper analyses hysterical tendencies, inconsistent behavior of Lahiri's protagonists as the outburst, thus, the subtle ways of resistance. Thus, the paper draws the conclusion that Lahiri's stories demonstrate economically and socially marginalized woman who lack the act of protest as they cannot speak, tending to develop the different verbal and physical inconsistencies.

Keywords: *Hysteric, verbal inconsistencies, resistance, subaltern*

Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) exposes the social outcasts, especially in the two stories, "A Real Durwan" and "The Bibi Haldar." Both the stories' women protagonists experience social exclusion for two reasons: they are single and they are physically fragile. "A Real Durwan" presents an old woman deported to Calcutta from her land during the partition. In Calcutta, she faces extreme hardship and oppression from people around where she lives in. Old and physically weak, Boori Ma gathers the narratives from her past and wants people to listen to her. Likewise, Bibi Haldar, a spinster in her twenty-nine, speaks the incomprehensible language when she falls into the convulsion. As a sufferer of unknown attacks, her biological and societal need does not get fulfilled, more specifically no member in her society and family tries to find out a man for her as she is regarded as a paranormal woman. Received as bane in the family after the demise of her father, Haldar

feels an utter exclusion from her family as a victim of ailment. What do inconsistence speeches, fragile physical condition and incomprehensive murmuring mean? What are the attempts made by the social margin to remain included in the society? How does the society perceive their abnormal bodily contition? These are some of the questions this paper attempts to deal with.

To answer the questions, in this paper, the theoretical insights from the concept of resistance can bring a new light into Lahiri's two short stories "Bibi Haldar" and "Real Durwan." Primarily, the concept of resistance attempts to analyze a wide range of strategies taken by individuals and collectives to avoid the further oppression or to express the disagreement. In this paper, Jocelyn A Hollander and Rachel L Einwohner's ideas are borrowed to define resistance as the wider set of actions and behavior involving the issue of recognition and intent. Such a set of behavior and action ranges from micro act of foot pulling to political mobilizations. They argue that these actions and behaviors do not go necessarily noticed to the intended authorities. Sometimes without a precise intention, an individual may go through the behavior to resist the side of oppressor. In addition, the subaltern perspectives by Antonio Gramsci also help to deal with social, political and geographical hierarchy of power seen in Lahir's stories. Similarly, Gyatri Chakrowrty Spivak's theoretical insights regarding the subaltern perspective assist in studying women's in/ability to practice their autonomous self.

Literature Review

The anthology is examined through multiple lenses ranging from the issues of subjectivity to the structural pattern of the stories. The critical reception of the stories tends to fall under the three categories: diasporic experiences, issue of subjectivity and structural aspects. Diasporic aspects focus on the stories set in America. Likewise, the issue of subjectivity deals with the experience of woman both in Indo-Bengali setting and American space. In addition, the structural aspects scrutinize the linguistic aspects of the stories.

Among nine stories, six stories entirely deal with diasporic experiences in one or other ways. Interestingly, the most critics pay their critical heed in diasporic experiences. Robin E. Field in his article, "Writing Second Generation: Negotiating Cultural Borderlands in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Name Sake*" focuses mostly on the experience of new generation outside their nation. He highlights the point that "the second generation is constantly negotiating their understanding of themselves, striving to balance, if not also integrate their cultural roots and their American life style" (166). Field's attention marks the experience of second generation living in America; it overlooks the woman who attempts to balance, finding an appropriate position in the society. Writing more on the story, he contends, "Lahiri anticipates the prevalence of a global identity that relies upon neither nationality nor ethnicity; but personal prerogative: an identity to be forged by the third generation and beyond" (176). Thus, Field marks the broader area, skipping the issue of identity at the local level. His analysis fails to see the old and single women's issue of identity from the subaltern perspective.

Another critic Keith Willits focuses on the fluid identity of Diaspora. She explores the role of map in shaping "experience of cultural belonging and struggle with identity" (76). Moreover, she analyses the ways the stories locate "map as field of exchange- both between viewer and various cartographic representation they encounter and between the characters who in the stories impromptu geography lessons" (77). She argues that the spatial relationship symbolized by maps offer further insights of unsettled identities and precarious affiliations that attend the unhomey condition of diasporas' citizenship (78). In the similar way, Willits highlights the experiences of diaspora. Her

argument is made to highlight the experience of Diaspora, border issue and identity. She observes the spatial factors and impact on the identity formation, focusing on Diaspora identities.

Lahiri's narrative style and structural pattern serve as an important part in the critical discussion, as a few critics have analyzed it. Focusing on the narrative perspectives, Brewster E. Fit, in her article "Bibi Babel: Treating Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" as the "malady of interpreters" makes comment on Lahiri's narrator making analogy with Faulkner's "Rose for Emily." The contention here is that Lahiri's narrator in her short story "Treatment of Bibi Haldar" assists the writer in making her writing "experimental" (116). However, the narrator in the short stories share the similarity with "Rose for Emily," she calls Lahiri's narrator as "culturally authentic" (117). In this context, Noelle Brada Williams, in her essay, "Reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreting Maladies* as a short story cycle" analyses the stories as the tale circle rather than the collection of different stories. She shows the connection between the stories. However, the narrator of the story is town's woman who resides by the side of Bibi Haldar, an unmarried woman in her twenty-nine with mysterious illness, narrates herself as the helping hand to an ignored woman. Commenting on Bibi's final part as she seems to have her maladies disappeared, "this cure appears to have been affected by copulation, pregnancy, childbirth and single motherhood" (119). Fit regards the cure of maladies as the Bibi's begetting of a child; however, he overlooks her deliberate silence to declare the father of a baby and its significance. More importantly, Bibi's earlier attempt to get appropriate space in the society is yet unexplored.

Subjectivity is one of the important issues that is prevalent in these stories. In this context, Laura Anh Williams, in her article "Food Ways and Subjectivity in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreting of Maladies*," analyzes the stories in terms of food and its relation to the subjectivity. For her, food in the cross-cultural atmospheres is the way to get agency. Moreover, the food culture is analyzed as an "alternative to the dominant culture" (74). Female characters' association with food is regarded as "comfortable association between home and food" (75). However, this paper discusses the characters and their ways of getting agency through the foods in the foreign land, which does not correlate the women's relation with food or other material such as broom, basket and other feminine things.

In contrast, Mongia Sunanda works on the local issues such as representation of Indian cities and attitudes of characters towards the physical materials. To quote Sunanda, as she rightly comments on the setting of "A Real Durwan," stating, "rework (s) in a very watered down version the 'black hole' image of Calcutta" (207). Here, Sunanda analyses the representation of Indian city space in Lahiri's short story as suffocating for the subaltern woman. She stresses that the Indian middle class obsession with materials such as ornaments and decorating items as she contends while particularly commenting on "A Real Durwan," "a telephone and washbasin are two unfortunate things that people in India worry about, for even the poorest are likely to worry about jewelry" (207). Sunanda looks at the hypocrisies in the Indian city space where even the poor people are obsessed with the collection of ornaments more than the basic needs. Regarding the story "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar," Sunanda further explains the hypocritical state of city as she contends, "an emotionally suppressed Bibi Haldar finds her cure in her mysterious pregnancy that strangely causes no religious or moral upheaval in her community to which any middle class society set up is inevitably prone to" (207). Highlighting on the cure of Bibi along with her pregnancy and response of town people, her analysis questions the usual response to unusual pregnancy. This

critical reception, however, acknowledges Bibi Halder's suppression of her desire that fails to analyze the attempt or the sites where the voice of resistance reside.

Ronny Noor interprets the stories in the collection of *Interpreting Maladies* as the epitome of hidden maladies in the relationships in the cosmopolitan society. He correctly criticizes the Indian societies as fake and showy as does Sunanda in her critical reading. Commenting on the story "The Real Durwan," Ronny again contends that "the residence of a Calcutta tenement unjustly cast out an old sweeper because of a theft in building while she was away in town. They show no sympathy for the innocent victim despite pleading" (366). The critic, however, acknowledges the unjust treatment to a refugee woman, Boori Ma, who sadly undermines the response of Boori Ma who is falsely accused of being involved in robbery of washbasin installed in one of the houses of her community. Moreover, the helpless characters' state of exclusion from the society and their attempts to reject oppression. It is the subtle ways they adopt to find space in the society that has not got space in Ronny's critical reception.

Alireza Farahbaksh and Shabnam Bozorgi has analyzed the stories from the feminist point of view, particularly paying attention to the story "The Treatment of Bibi Haladar." He analyses the protagonist of the story Bibi Haldar as an "example of the Cixious woman" (127). Citing Cixious's notion of women who tend to experience loneliness in their family and the society, they put Bibi Haldar into the category of "Cixious woman" as she is isolated from her own cousin with whom she is living. Bibi feels isolated inside the house does not necessarily feels alone outside home as she is assisted by the town woman. The critic falsely categorizes Bibi as self-isolated despite her precise attempt to express her wish to the town's woman.

Madhuparna Mitra explains Boori Ma, in light of broader studies, as refugee who has "crossed the geographical border that separates India from East Pakistan". She is taken as the representative of outsider who reveals "the general indifference if not outright hostility, displayed by west Bengalis towards East Bengali migrants" (243). They confine their analysis of single woman in the light of partition or the oppression posed by forced migration; however, they overlook the ways refugees try to express their protest to remain in the land of others.

As discussed above, most critics focus on the efforts of getting Indian American identity as diaspora. Very few critics pay critical attention on "A Real Durwan" and "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" as these stories with the issue of single woman in the Indo-Bengali setting. The critics such as Madhuparna Mitra, Farahboksh and Bozorongi, Ronny Noor and Mongia Shunanda take these stories for critical readings, meagerly paying attention to the attempt made by these single women like Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar who protest against the oppressive society and people around them. Their silences, inconsistency speeches and abnormal attitudes towards the people around them have not caught the eyes of earlier critics. Apart from these literary studies, this paper look into the two social outcast like single women and their attempt to get agency in the patriarchal and oppressive society. Unlike most critics, this paper undertakes two stories set in the Indo-Bengali geography to see the dimension of resistance by the single women in the oppressive society.

Women and Subalterns: A Textual Analysis

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* brings the voices of either the diaspora or minorities in subtle ways. Among nine stories in the anthology, "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" and "A Real Durwan" specifically deal with the problems faced by the single women as an outcast in their society. Boori Ma in "A Real Durwan" is a victim of partition who gets reminded of her past in her own land. Likewise, Bibi Haldar in "The

Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is a woman with mysterious illness. However, her ailment is the reason that she has not got a man to spend life with. Moreover, the attempts are made for the treatment of such malady – medical, herbal and religious – the results remain unchanged. Despite her position as outcast in the society, at the end of the story when she gets the baby from unknown father she seems to have cured her disease. In both stories, two single women try to resist the social structure and social evils. However, both female characters' attempts go unnoticed.

Although Boori and Bibi Haldar are unheard and ignored, they attempt to make themselves heard. In order to remain in the society, they adopt several strategies. For instance, Boori Ma, thrown by the partition violence in the Indian land, tries to assimilate in the society by bringing her narrative from the past. Despite her pathetic physical state, “She was sixty-four years old, with hair in a knot no larger than a walnut, and she looked almost as narrow from the front as she did from the side” (85). She sweeps the streets and tries to demonstrate herself as a woman in a healthy state. As an unheard and ignored woman, her attempt is to make herself audible so that she gets space in the society she lives in. To quote lines from the story,

In fact, the only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut. It was with this voice that she enumerated, twice a day as she swept the stairwell, the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition. (85)

Her voice, however, is shrill to the members of hypocritical city space of Calcutta that signifies Boori Ma’s attempt to make herself heard in the land. Likewise, Bibi Haldar, tries to make herself audible as the narrator says, “Her voice was louder than necessary, as if she were speaking to a deaf person. ‘Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?’” (169). The loudness signifies the fact that, as Bibi feels muted in the society, she adopts loudness in her speech to be audible in the society.

Lahiri’s female protagonists try to claim their identity by their work where they have not got identity as a normal female. Both women despite their unstable physical state, work for their living. Boori Ma does not ask for anything to the people who show affection to her. Rather she has the materials to work with her such as broom and basket to clean the street to make her living. Likewise, Bibi Haldar keeps the record in inventory for her living. She also searches for her identity as a normal woman as she expresses her desire to get a husband to spend her life with as she says to her neighboring woman,

She expresses her past status in her own society. For instance, when everybody sees her body pathetically and accepts her merely as an entertainer she gets reminded of the past and utters them verbally, yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don’t believe me such comforts you cannot even dream” (80)

However, despite her attempt to get respectable identity in her society, the society treats her merely as an entertainer.

Bibi Haldar, who is taken as a social outcast due to her physiological problem like mysterious convulsion, wants the society to accept her as a normal woman as does Boori Ma in “A Real Durwan.” Bibi Haldar’s frequent visit to the neighboring woman and Boori Ma’s regular conversation with the people around signifies the fact that they wish their society to include them as appropriate member of it. In the case of Bibi Haldar, she says, “Apart from my condition I am perfectly healthy” (129). Her desires

are not fulfilled and the women around her tag her as ugly, abnormal and woman as a narrator. She is a typical woman of Indian patriarchal society as she states, "She was not pretty, her upper lip was thin her teeth too small. Her gum protruded when she spoke . . . her voice was louder than necessary" (168). In order to oppose these tags, she time and again makes a louder voice to resist the traditional conception of beauty and ideal womanhood. She however looks for someone to marry her as she is ill-treated by her cousin.

Despite their attempt to maintain their identity in the oppressive patriarchal society, Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar still feel of being excluded. The social exclusion makes their identity in limbo that they question the language of the society. For instance, both as the social outcast either narrate their story in an inconsistent way or utter their real need in an incomprehensible way. Commenting on Bibi's state, the narrator describes, "Bibi conversed in totally incomprehensible language, and slept without dreams" (174). These acts of indifference are humorous and madly that demonstrate the ways to utter out dissatisfaction towards the society they live in.

Both the outcastes, however, suffer similar kind of social oppression, the intensity of suffering is high in the case of Boori Ma as she is doubly marginalized. The fact can be traced when it comes to the societal treatment of her as she has the layers of social marginalization such as a single old and refugee woman. Primarily, she resides in the land of others as she is thrown away by the partition and secondarily as a single and old woman. As an old woman, her intensity of suffering is far greater than the ones faced by Bibi. In this context, I quote Foucault, "The body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (180). Both the fragile bodies, Boori Ma's and Bibi Haldar's, become unproductive and the intensity of suppression differs due to their age. Bibi Haldar is a spinster with mysterious maladies in her own land. Whenever she has intense illness she tends to get supports from the society, as narrator shares a great deal of sympathy towards her in a detrimental way. In contrast, Boori Ma's intensity of suffering is deeper in comparison to a hysteric spinster. The accusation of the robbery, an inhuman behavior, marks her subordination in multiple layers. One of the members of the community blindly accuses her in this way, "This is all her doing" (90). He further gets approval when another member says, "For days she has been wandering the streets speaking to the strangers" (90). The act of domination reaches the climax as her tools for survival: brooms and baskets, are tossed away by the residents. Unlike Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar seems to have more support from the residents on her side as a woman attempts to pacify her when she suffers from convulsion. However, Boori Ma attempts to resist the false accusation verbally, "Believe me, and believe me" (90). Time and again her voices are unheard. Thus, the level of suppression becomes deeper in the land of others.

Lahiri's characters attempt to resist the suppression as they feel socially ignored when they want to be part of the society. Boori Ma's narration in "A Real Durwan" gets equal respect in the new land that is the "covert resistance" in Jocelyn A. and Rachel L. Einwohner's term as it refers to "acts that are intentional yet go unnoticed by their targets, although they are recognized as resistance by others, culturally aware awareness" (545). Her act of mourning back to her idyllic past goes unnoticed by the targets. She tends to speak about her past to let them know about her appropriateness in that society, which goes unnoticed by the people she targets for. Despite all these restrictions, she becomes successful to catch the eyes of the cultural observers. Bibi Haldar's resistance tends to fall under the category of overt resistance as she directly intends to resist the oppression upon her by her cousin and abnormal behavior by the society. Neglected both from inside family and outside of the society, she resists the societal idea that she is an

abnormal woman who is deprived of entering into the social institution, that is, marriage. Her resistance redefines the concept of female interest. The women who seem to have unhealthy body remain a burden to the family as they could not find a man for the marriage.

Both the subordinate female characters to some extent come up with the resistant. To discuss further on Gyatri Chhokrovarty Spivak's idea on "Can the Subaltern Speak?", the subaltern's attempts to speak may come to create space for their identity. Looking for the micro forms of protest such as behavior and verbal reaction can be futile as social outcaste may not bring them explicitly. However, bodily reactions and intensity of their seemingly unnecessary reaction necessarily speak the wishes of the subaltern. Bibi Haldar's wish for the husband and a child can be a liberating factor for her circumstance as it is difficult for her to find a man due to her mysterious illness. Similarly, for Boori Ma getting accepted in the society can be a matter of getting agency as she suffers the identity crisis in India as an East Pakistani refugee. In the very micro level, the real subaltern may not speak explicitly, but there can be several paths to see their way of resistance. For example, Bibi Haldar's incomprehensive speeches and Boori Ma's inconsistent narrative can be the paths to unfold the strategies to express their resistance. In par with the fact that there are several micro level strategies such as narratives or non-verbal things to deal with the resistance. For instance, Bibi Haldar repressed her desire due to the societal restriction, which directly cannot express her desire for a man to her cousin, getting mysterious convulsion more frequently when she cannot express with her cousin. As the narrator describes, "Things had not been so bad before her father died" (129). In this regard, Spivak states, "Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists woman. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (308). As a subaltern, a single woman lacks appropriate voice, but she has multiple forms of expression as demonstrated by Lahiri's protagonists.

In addition, Bibi's physiological reactions serve as the outlet of repressive social structure. Her convulsion and intense efforts made people turn to be the futile until and unless she becomes the mother of a child. As an abnormal woman, her desires never get fulfilled despite her attempt to find a man. All medical practices and human cure practices get questioned by the constant mysterious maladies of her. To quote the narrator,

Treatments offered by doctors only made matters worse. Allopathy, homeopaths, Ayurveda's — over time, all branches of the medical arts had been consulted. Their advice was endless. After x-rays, probes, auscultations, and injections, some merely advised Bibi to gain weight, others to lose it. If one forbade her to sleep beyond dawn, another insisted she remain in bed till noon. (168)

Her physiological state directly questions the male-centered knowledges and medical practices. As Bibi feels cured when she gives birth to a child, as the narrator describes the situation in this way, "A few of our servants were questioned, and in tea stalls and bus stands, possible suspects were debated and dismissed. But there was no point carrying out an investigation. She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured" (281). For Bibi, her pregnancy and child serve as the way to get agency; as a result, her mysterious maladies get cured.

Conclusion

To sum up, both the stories "A Real Durwan" and "The Bibi Haldar," present the female characters as social outcastes with subtle ethos of resistance. At micro level, the bodily reactions such as inconsistent speeches, abnormal physiological reactions function

as an attempt to resist the oppressive system. The stories also explore the fact that the physical state of maladies is subaltern in one way or the other. They suffer, for instance, Bibi Haldar's mysterious maladies that make people to think about the solution and Boori Ma's unusual verbal expressions that people pay heed to serve as the tool to resist further social exclusion. The tools such as fake narrative, inconsistent speeches and sudden physical reactions can be the site to analyze the attempt of social minorities to have the appropriate space in the oppressive society. The stories provide a further dimension on body politics for the study as the bodies of major characters that have become central sites to practice power.

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