

PORTRAYAL OF HUMILIATION AND DISCRIMINATION IN JHUMPALAHIRI'S SHORT STORIES

(Special reference to *Mrs. Sen's, The Real Durwan.*)

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ABSTRACT

The present paper has been undertaken to explore the portrayal of humiliation and discrimination in Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories (special reference to Mrs, Sen's and The Real Durwan). The paper will mainly focus on the experiences of humiliation and discrimination in short stories, Mrs, Sen's and The Real Durwan and how these stories play vital role to achieve and demonstrate as diasporic elements. Also Jhumpa turns to social malady- the selfishness, meanness and callousness of the people in general. Interpreter of Maladies is her first book interprets the problems engendered by the experience of migrancy and diaspora such as displacement, rootlessness, fragmentation, discrimination, marginallization and crisis in identity.

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 in London to parents who emigrated from Calcutta, and raised in Rhode Island, America, Lahiri has been a precocious child, writing since the age of seven. Lahiri received multiple degrees from Boston University: an M.A. in English, M.F.A. in Creative Writing, M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. She took a fellowship at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center, which lasted for the next two years (1997–1998)¹. Lahiri has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

Lahiri's early short stories faced rejection from publishers "for years". Her debut short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies* was finally released in 1999². The stories address sensitive dilemmas in the lives of Indians or Indian immigrants, with themes such as marital difficulties, miscarriages, and the disconnection between first and second generation United States immigrants.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Interpreter of Maladies is her first book and it is a collection of short stories. Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer prize for Literature in 1999 for her collection of nine stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*³. Ms. Lahiri has used all her stories very judiciously and pragmatically to characterize her ideas and to express them very colourfully. *Interpreter of Maladies*, with the sub-title "Stories of Bengal, Boston and Beyond" deals with the problems of the immigrants in an alien land, the yearnings of exile, the emotional confusion.

Being an immigrant herself Lahiri deeply felt the importance of family bonds which tie people to their homelands. She has undergone the trauma of failing to find her identity in a world where she could never have a sense of belongingness and so tries to fall back upon the treasured memories of homeland. *A Real Durwan* was written when Lahiri soon returned from a visit to India in 1992. *A Real Durwan* is the first story in *Interpreter of Maladies* entirely about Indians living in India. A durwan is someone who watches over a building, a caretaker who guards the entrance against intruders and keeps track of the residents' comings and goings.

A Real Durwan is not really about the inadequacies of Calcutta plumbing, but more about the casual cruelty the poor can be subjected to in any culture. Even more important, it is a

character sketch of the destitute old woman called “Boori Ma,” reportedly based on a old woman who lived in the house of Lahiri’s uncle and aunt in Calcutta. Although she is welcome at first, the kindness of the apartment dwellers in her building evaporates when their new sink is stolen, and they blame her for not being “a real durwan,” even though she has suffered a theft of her own far more disastrous, considering her poverty. Boori Ma is not portrayed as a particularly sympathetic victim; it is never quite clear whether she is lying about having come from a wealthy zamindar (landowning) family. Clearly she greatly resents her fall in the world to the point that she can not qualify even as a durwan. Lacking wealth and power, she also lacks the humility and submissiveness that might appeal to well-off people in a poor woman, and that is her downfall.

Also Jhumpa turns to social malady- the selfishness, meanness and callousness of the people in general. Though the story focuses on the plight of an old woman, a refugee from East Bengal, who worked as an unauthorized gatekeeper of a flat building at hours of need, and was mercilessly driven out when the raised social status of the residents required a „real durwan“, it is the callousness of the people in general that comes in the forefront.

It is not only in London, America that the Indian migrants and their children undergo humiliating and discriminatory experiences, the diasporas meet this kind of treatment in every dominant culture and in other nation. Lahiri shows this through the predicament of Boori Ma who being a Bengali, was sent to Calcutta after the Partition, Being from a lower caste, she earns her meager livelihood by cleaning the stairs and guarding the locality. She is given a place by the Bengali people of those apartments to keep her belongings and sleep for the night

under the letter box. Also she is considered a refugee, a victim of changing times and is kept apart in the shared activities of the locality.

OBJECTIVE

The story *Mrs. Sen's* is about quintessential American experience. Mrs. Sen is the wife of Mr. Sen who teaches Mathematics at an American university. Mrs Sen, who is never named, is a thirty-year old helpless, obedient, Bengali wife brought to America by her husband. Being isolated from her family and friends and displaced from her home. She finds the North American life harassing and hostile⁴. She starts a day care center, a typical American kid.

The story is about how Eliot sees the ways of Mrs. Sen's and contrasts them with that of his mother's.

Mrs. Sen's struggle to adopt to American ways like driving a car, which she hates and she constantly reminds herself that she used to have a driver in India, to drive her around. Eliot notes that two things make her happy. One was the arrival of letter from India, which would make her so happy that her apartment would be too small for her. The other thing which made her happy was buying fresh fish. Mrs. Sen is not just constitutionally timid, she is terribly homesick⁵.

Lahiri's *Mrs.Sen* presents a heart-tugging story of an immigrant who works like a baby-sitter. Mrs. Sen is an Indian but Lahiri describes her American position who faces a lot of problems in adjustment⁶. In this respect Lahiri is profusely praised for her nine well-knit stories in which she portrays the characters drawn from all over the world.

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