

FEMALE PSYCHE: A STUDY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SELECT SHORT STORIES IN INTERPRETER OF MALADIES

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Abstract:

Jhumpa Lahiri is the second generation diasporic writer living in the United States. She has to her credit two short story collections and two novels. Her writings explore the tribulations of the immigrants in the new world and reveal their craving for wealth and liberty on the one hand and the other hand emptiness and unhappiness and their never-ending quest for identity. The diverse experiences of the displaced Indian women in the process of cross-cultural initiations are poignantly recorded. The first short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* consists of nine short stories with India in the background, Boston and beyond. The stories bring to light the on-going struggles of the women prominently in their effort to assert themselves. The longing for identity by all the women characters with all their divided intentions in assimilating in the new world is portrayed deftly by the writer. The present paper examines the struggle and success emanating from the feeling of hopelessness of the protagonist of Indian origin in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar." Bibi Haldar's story is one of the two stories in the collection, set in India. The feeling of 'Otherness' and quest for identity in Bibi Haldar because of the unknown disease that turns her out to be a complete woman with 'home' by giving birth to a child and that turns a new leaf in her life as she is 'cured' from the past and takes a fresh breath into her life.

Keywords: short story, immigrant, assimilating, Otherness, identity etc

“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is the penultimate story in Jhumpa Lahiri’s collection of stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*. This is one of the three short stories in the collection set India as a backdrop. The story is narrated from the third person perspective – the community and the neighbors of the protagonist, Bibi Haldar. Bibi is a 29-year-old poor Indian girl living in Calcutta. The lady has been suffering from an unknown ailment and is found to be a victim of ‘alienation’ from her own family in her homeland unlike the other female protagonists of Lahiri. Her recurring perception of ‘becoming-woman’ and the identity crisis of ‘being woman’ are poignantly narrated by the author. It is her process of gaining womanhood and fighting against ‘homelessness’ in her own house is the theme which is strikingly narrated in the story. The story colors the various shades of an ‘Indian Woman’ in terms of appearance, practices, expectations, and responsibilities of serving a man in a typical Indian environment.

The story revolves around the character Bibi Haldar, her strife with her own family members, her constant desire to overcome her unknown illness, her attempts to look good and her yearning to find a husband and become a ‘woman’. The tryst and tyranny of Bibi Haldar in unveiling herself from ‘Girl, unstable’ to a ‘cured mother’ and self-sustained woman handling the business of her own is depicted in realistically from the Indian perspective by Jhumpa Lahiri. The feeling of estrangement is the initial feeling which is expressed throughout the story. The story stands out among all the others in the collection as the eight other stories portray the problems and the struggles after marriage and the crisis in marital relationships and this particular story speaks about all her ordeals and efforts in getting into a marital relationship and thus become a ‘woman’ in the Indian context.

Bibi Haldar's attempts and desires to lead a life of a normal woman are often explicit in the narrative. "[...] wanted a man. [...] wanted to be spoken for, protected, and placed on her path in her life." (116) Bibi, who has attained the age of marriage, has had a condition since her childhood with an undiagnosed ailment. She has tried every method and visited many doctors and healers but all remain bane in her life. In spite of these endless remedies and suggestions, her disease is never cured. The treatment she is given is found ruthless and hard to endure.

“In efforts to cure [...] brought [...] holy water from seven holy rivers.
Her wrists were bound with ropes [...]
Auspicious stones adorned her fingers.
Allopaths, homeopaths, ayurvedic – overtime, [...] had been consulted. Their
advice was endless. (158)

With all the pathetic experiences, she lives with the heartless couple, her cousin Haldar and his wife, who never cared or loved Bibi. Bibi is always treated as an outsider and her

condition was pitiable as she is treated as a bad omen. Her continuous attempts of looking like a woman are understood in her displaying the female psyche and her yearning for experiencing and exploring 'female' in self. She always dreams of getting married to a protective man, blessed with a family of her own.

However, Lahiri describing the protagonist's physical appearance writes about the gloomy shade of Indian traditions and beliefs. The belief is strongly rooted in the Indian community especially about a girl to look beautiful for getting married, unlike Bibi who "[...] was not pretty." (160) Her desire for getting married is constantly said out through her mouth to all her neighbors. The plight of Bibi Haldar is made a little easier because of the caring and good-hearted community around; the neighbors are the only solace that is usually expected by many immigrant women in Lahiri's stories. Her struggle in overcoming her screaming fits and faint is expected to be cured only with 'marriage', a mystic notion found in the Indian system of dealing with such illness of a woman. "They say it's the only hope. "A case of over-excitement" [...] "relations will calm her blood." (162)

Jhumpa Lahiri is implicit in her description of the Indian version of female identity through Bibi Haldar in the story. A girl is to be brought up in a typical way i.e. to be a ready-to-serve man after marriage. However, this particular value system is noticed in all her short stories, a persistent Indian style of living for the immigrants away from home. Bibi, in this way, is considered a naïve, impractical in most of the daily routines as she "had never been taught to be a woman." (163) The brutal treatment of brother and brother's wife towards her by keeping her away from little comforts and enjoyments in life make her feel that she is an exile to her 'home', and her own people.

Lahiri circumspectly describes the social system prevailing in India, where a girl is made to feel content and blessed only when she is married and has her real 'home' and family in terms of husband, children, and in-laws in her life. The constant desire of an Indian- brought-up girl for marriage in spite of her illness and inability to meet the expectations of an eligible bride is a real-time set up of the importance of marriage in a woman's life. Especially, in a value studded country like India, girls are treated as 'Amanat' the property of 'others'- here it is the family into which she enters after marriage. The obsession of becoming one such worthy 'Amanat', Bibi often gets panic and beaten up with the vicious ordeals in getting married. The story of Bibi Haldar typically reminds the readers about the way the women in the world need to be respected as mentioned in the Manusmriti 3.55:

pitribhirbhratribhishcaitahpatibhirdevaraistatha|
pujya bhushayitavyashca bahukalyanamipsubhiih ||

Bibi, from the above-mentioned definition, is said to be deprived of this honor in life and is made to undergo all the ordeals all through her life. Likewise, Bibi Haldar is under the protection and care of her father in the early days. As a teacher of Mathematics, her father tenders resignation and undertakes tuitions at home to take proper care of his daughter. He is used to recording the observations of her illness and enquires different doctors for the cure. He is even used to communicate with doctors in England through letters about his daughter's health. He always reassures Bibi and instills confidence in her by saying "To every problem, there is a solution." (166) His demise makes her life pitiable.

Having deprived of the husband in her life it is under awful brother's mercy she has to live. He only houses her for which she is asked to keep the track of the inventory at his store for free of pay. The marginalized Bibi in her own place starves for love, care, and attention which are never satisfied through her family, Haldar and his wife. It is the community which stands beside her in the deserted conditions and gives her company by encouraging her to replenish her clothing and provided her with the change of looks that might increase her matrimonial prospects. However, having a 'man' in her life is not all about the relationship but it is more of 'affair'- the wedding, invitations, flowers, rituals and the whole itinerary occurring in one's life.

Her obsession for all these occasions in life portrays her angst in realizing herself as a woman- a female who is "tempting to feed a man!" (163) To keep up the chances of Bibi's marriage open the neighbors have always helped her in sculpting her woman in sense- by teaching her to wear a sari and updating her with the latest fashions of that season. Because they realized that "It's what she's wanted all along." (163-164) they always have argued with Haldar's couple.

The smallest details of life and the way Jhumpa Lahiri weaves a full fabric of human relationships in her works is observed to be the reason she uses her cultural background of being born to Indian parents – as an Indian American to create characters and plot to represent her cultural group. She always has mentioned her struggle to understand Indian culture-its complex structure of code and practice.

The prominence of marriage and the need of a caretaker in the form of 'husband' in the lives of Indian women are thoroughly portrayed from the words, ideas, and practices in the story. The concept of being 'female' in Indian race is not just limited to look beautiful, attractive and able for conjugal life and continuing progeny by giving birth. It is further depicted in the daily chores of the routine life in a typical Indian family set-up. Activities, like lightening a coal stove, boiling rice, knowing the hunger of her man and above all the qualities like tailoring, stitching, embroidery or crocheting shawls, are considered the prerequisites for a girl to be in wedded life.

In spite of all the inabilities, Bibi Haldar is still confident and determined "to lure a man." (167) Her helplessness is displayed as she faces her life with wild and cruel treatment when her brother and his wife treat her "contagious like the pox." (167) She is made to live in the downstairs in a storeroom, treated as 'other' in the home by keeping separate soaps, towels and separate plates to eat. Her disgust for the treatment from the family and disgrace because of her health makes her feel that life alone is burdensome and an unbearable curse to live without a 'man' in life. She then tries to encompass her perfect bride chances by attempting to work on appearance i.e., physical, physiological ways. "I have never had a cold or flu. I have never had jaundice. I have never suffered from colic or indigestion." (167) she desperately feels that she needs supervision from the man for her only condition as the doctor also concludes that "marriage would cure her." (161)

In all her attempts to woo a man and get married, she also displays the strength of a woman by maintaining poise when she is left alone by her brother and his family with three hundred rupees under her door. Her behavior gets transformed suddenly into a mature lady and in spite of people asking her about marriage "nothing persuaded her." She retreats into a deep and prolonged silence, and it's once again the neighbors around her come to her rescue and it is this nature/trait of the Indian community that haunted Shoba and Mrs.Sen in the other stories.

Her feminine psyche is noticed in the story where she receives a lot of care and attention from the people surrounding her. The quality of winning hearts is a feminine quality which is though failed to win the heart of a 'man' in her life. The sudden jolt of conditions in Bibi's life for which she is expected to undergo sudden illness and freak instead she remains dark and does not come out for any reason. As the season's pass, Bibi is found pregnant and she is not ready to reveal the man behind it. In spite of all this, the neighbors have always been helpful to Bibi. Surprisingly, Bibi picks up her health as she reaches to her due date to give birth to her child. The birth of a baby boy gives new birth to Bibi as a complete woman, 'cured mother' and emerges as a self-sustained woman by working on things and the owner of the left Haldar's store.

Throughout this ordeal, she pretends to be fine but has not been social and hasn't come out for any reason and it is all clear that she's given up on marrying a man as "nothing persuaded her." (170) Her struggle to survive and identity as a 'woman' and the consciousness of making a home, bringing up the child and all her dreams of living a life of protection brings her success after becoming a mother and protecting her healthy baby. Above all, she is found "to the best of [...] knowledge, cured." (172)

In all the present socio-economic, cultural background of Indian ethos, she emerges as a successful immigrant in terms of finding a new 'home' in her own place is the finest quality of feminine psyche displayed. In making a new life she proudly says, "The world begins at the bottom of the stairs, now I am free to discover life as I please." (170) which emphasizes her freedom of creating her own life is triumphant of her female consciousness - being a 'woman' in life. The art of narrating such lives in her collection, is rightly commented by Ling Yun that "the whole narration of the story stands for the women "to speak their own voice and shows that "women warriors(s)" against the yoke and prejudice of patriarchy as they finally throw off the shackles and live an independent and brave life. (Yun 6)

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