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Address:-Ashok Yakkaldevi 258/34, Raviwar Peth, Solapur - 413 005 Maharashtra, India
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THE PREDICAMENT OF UNDERDOGS IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *A REAL DURWAN* AND *THE TREATMENT OF BIBI HALDAR*

Darbarsing Dhansing Girase

Assistant Professor, P. G. Dept. of English, G. T. Patil Arts, Commerce & Science College,
Nandurbar (MS) .

Abstract:

*A civilized society aspires to create an environment where all members of society have equal chance to come up in life irrespective of their social standing, position, strengths and weaknesses. This perception and expectation however seems to be sometimes contradicted by ground realities where society creates conditions in which the weak, helpless, powerless are rendered misfits and turned into underdogs leading to their subservience and powerlessness. The stories titled *A Real Durwan* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) seem to reflect this contradiction of human life. The characters of Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar, respectively from the aforementioned two stories, come to represent as underdogs in the given socio-cultural set up. If being a refugee is what renders Boori Ma an underdog, a mysterious illness and pangs of unfulfilled desires is what make Bibi Haldar's life miserable. An attempt is made here to analyse the situations and circumstances that turn the two characters into underdogs, the way they face their predicament as underdogs and the way it affects their individual lives. The discriminatory norms of the society, its beliefs, attitudes and tendencies seem to be by and large responsible for the misfortune of two characters.*

KEY WORDS:

underdog, society, helplessness, powerlessness, Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar,

INTRODUCTION

Jhumpa Lahiri's debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is an acclaimed book which has been awarded in the year 2000 with Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. An expatriate writer, Lahiri's stories generally tell the lives of Indians in exile. "Her writing is rooted in the Indian milieu and attempts to capture dislocation and ambivalence with a unique play of words." 2 Out of the nine stories in the book the stories titled *A Real Durwan* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* present the characters of Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar respectively that come to represent as underdogs owing to their helplessness, powerlessness and marginalization in a given socio-cultural set up. An underdog is a person who is "thought to have little chance of winning" (DK Illustrated Oxford Dictionary, 2012. p.736) in a race of life. His/her very position renders him/her powerless and in a marginalized situation. Survival of the fittest might be the law of nature but a civilized human society is supposed to create—a level playing field where all members of society have equal chance to survive and prosper, an environment where the weak, the abnormal and the old are not only accommodated but also allowed a life of dignity and respect. But contrary to this perception and expectation society often develops norms that make the life of some of its members difficult owing to their

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perceived weakness over which they have little or no control and renders them helpless and turns them into underdogs. This contradiction of civilized life seems to reflect in the aforementioned two stories from Jhumpa Lahiri's short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies*. It is the condition of being a refugee that makes Boori Ma an underdog, while Bibi's unusual epileptic-like condition not only becomes a cause of her misery but also renders her underdog. An attempt is made here to analyse their status as underdogs.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS:

A Real Durwan takes place in the post-independence, post-partition context, in a dilapidated three story building in Calcutta among the lower middle class occupants and centers round an old woman called Boori Ma who is a Bangladeshi refugee and who has been given shelter in the stairwell of this building. In return Boori Ma serves as sweeper and also stands guard between the occupants and the outside world, effectively serving as a durwan or a watchman.

Her very condition of being a refugee from Bangladesh makes Boori Ma a social underdog. It renders her helpless, subservient and at the mercy of the occupants of the building. The story begins with an account of her sleepless nights that led her to vigorously shake the mites out of her bedding and quilts on the morning before the third night. The following description throws light on her pathetic condition.

"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 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. At that time, she maintained, the turmoil had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a four-story brick house, a rosewood almari, and a number of coffer boxes whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari." (Lahiri, 1999: 70-71)

Besides her hardships Boori Ma likes to chronicle her easier times. She likes to talk of her former glory and lavish lifestyle. She says "Our bathwater was scented with petals and attars. Believe me, don't believe me, it was a luxury you cannot dream." (Lahiri, 1999:78-79) She describes with elaborate details the extravagant wedding of her third daughter who she claims got married to "a school principle." (Lahiri, 1999: 71) At other times she would say to anyone who cared to listen to her litanies, "Have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them" (Lahiri, 1999: 71)

The irony and pathos of her situation is intensified by the way she insists she had come from Bangladesh on a bullock cart and had not "...crossed the East Bengal border, with the thousands of others, on the back of a truck, between sacks of hemp." (Lahiri, 1999:72) If the children sometimes mischievously asked her if it was truck or cart she helplessly replies, "Why demand specifics? Why scrape lime from a betel leaf? Believe me, don't believe me. My life is composed of such griefs you cannot even dream them." (Lahiri, 1999:72) The occupants of the building put up with her lies basically because they were harmless stories and the common response was "*Bechareh*, she probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family." (Lahiri, 1999:72) "So she garbled facts. She contradicted herself. She embellished almost everything. But her rants were so persuasive, her fretting so vivid, that it was not so easy to dismiss her." (Lahiri, 1999:72) However,

"The theory eventually circulated that Boori Ma had once worked as a hired help for a prosperous *zamindar* back east, and was therefore capable of exaggerating her past at such elaborate lengths and heights. Her throaty impostures hurt no one. All agreed that she was a superb entertainer. In exchange for her lodging below the letter boxes, Boori Ma kept their crooked stairwell spotlessly clean." (Lahiri, 1999:73)

Equally ironic and pathetic are the ways in which Boori Ma tries to hide from others the wretchedness of her situation which is seen in the way she pretended about the cause of her sleepless nights. If someone suggested it was prickly heat that made her nights sleepless Boori Ma retorted, "I know prickly heat. This is not prickly heat. I haven't slept in three, perhaps four days. Who can count? I used to keep a clean bed. Our linens were muslin. Believe me, don't believe me, our mosquito nets were as soft as silk. Such comforts you cannot even dream them." (Lahiri, 1999:74) The fact of the matter however was that, "...prickly heat was common during the rainy season. But Boori Ma preferred to think that what irritated her bed, what stole her sleep, what burned like peppers across her thinning scalp and skin, was of a less mundane origin." (Lahiri, 1999:75)

The pathos of Boori Ma's situation reaches its nadir when the betterment-seeking residents in their competitive attempts to better their life style shoo away Boori Ma falsely accusing her of colluding with the theft in the building. If she pleaded innocence no one cared to listen to her pleas for the simple reason that she is no longer needed in the building that now required "a real *durwan*". (Lahiri, 1999:82) The residents

are now in a hurry to get rid of her. "So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her basket and reed broom down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma." (Lahiri, 1999:82) Boori Ma, a refugee, is once again rendered homeless and at the mercy of her fate, for being a refugee she is an underdog in a society where she is helpless and powerless with no say. Significantly the refrain 'Believe me, don't believe me' she always used to add while enumerating the details of her joys and sorrows of past which indicated her confidence and nonchalance changes to a humble, helpless "Believe me, believe me" (Lahiri, 1999:82) when accused of theft and facing imminent expulsion which highlights the utter helplessness born out of her recent sense of dispossession. As pointed out by Indira Nityanandam "The absurdity of accusation makes it doubly tragic." 3 The looming renewed sense of homelessness and total lack of agency makes it so, concretizing the lifelong emotional scar of being homeless and displaced a refugee carries.

In *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*, Bibi Haldar, an unmarried woman of thirty, is a central character and the story presents a poignant account of her predicament as a social misfit which arises out of her epileptic-like condition from childhood that often makes her unconscious and sends her into fits of "shameless delirium." (Lahiri, 1999: 159) On such occasions she would collapse, "...pounding her fists, kicking her feet, sweating buckets, lost to the world." (Lahiri, 1999: 161) Motherless at birth, her father did all he could as long as alive to cure her of her strange illness but without success. The nature of her illness was such that it struck without warning. Hence she could not be trusted even to cross a road or board a tram on her own, eventually leading to her confinement in a building where she lived with her only family, an elder cousin and his wife who consider her a bane for business, "a liability and loss." (Lahiri, 1999: 164) Because of her condition "Bibi had never been taught to be a woman; the illness had left her naïve in most practical matters." (Lahiri, 1999: 163) However as per her own admission and claim "Apart from my condition I am perfectly healthy" (Lahiri, 1999: 167), and like any other woman wishes to get married off, get loved and shower love. Helplessness and desperation makes her ask, "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?" (Lahiri, 1999: 160)

Bibi's excitement knew no bounds when once after a more than severe attack a doctor in charge of her case concluded that "a marriage would cure her." (Lahiri, 1999: 161) Delighted by the diagnosis, Bibi at once started preparing for the conjugal life. But then the odds in her path are no less formidable. Because of her condition Bibi has already acquired bad name and there are no takers for her in the marriage market. The "Unsavory sorts murmured indelicacies" (Lahiri, 1999: 162) at the prospects of 'such' a marriage and "Even the lonely four-toothed widower who repaired...handbags in the market could not be persuaded to propose" (Lahiri, 1999: 165) to Bibi. And as for her cousin and his wife, they already consider the whole idea of marrying off Bibi as waste of money and efforts. To the neighbours' prodding that marrying her off would at least get her off their hands they ask, "And waste our profits on a wedding? Feeding guests, ordering bracelets, buying a bed, assembling a dowry?" (Lahiri, 1999: 165) The reluctant cousin still placed a one-line advertisement in the town newspaper and felt "vindicated" when two months passed without a single reply, happy at the thought that "...she is unfit to marry" and that "...no man of sane mind would touch her." (Lahiri, 1999: 166) With the dying marriage prospects Bibi is left to suck in silence. Her isolation increased when she was forced to retreat to rooftop lest she infect with her mysterious disease the cousin's pregnant wife and their unborn child. The pain and poignancy in Bibi's voice is unmistakable when she says "...I'm contagious, like the pox" and asks "What will become of me...Is it not punishment enough that I bear this curse alone? Must I also be blamed for infecting another?" (Lahiri, 1999: 167) The cousin finally got rid of Bibi when he disappeared with his wife leaving behind "...an envelope containing three hundred rupees under Bibi's door." (Lahiri, 1999: 171) It is clear that deprivation of natural desires and enforced isolation from natural course of life has worsened Bibi's condition. It becomes also clear that Bibi's case is not as critical and impossible as it appears from outside for it is the socio-cultural environment that makes it appear so. Her society here obviously seems to lack the sympathetic and humanitarian attitude that is required to make her situation any better; on the contrary it has effectively connived to render her a social misfit. The way she is excluded from normal course of life and treated like an outcaste problematizes her case.

The end of the story however is most unexpected and in a way comes as a slap in the face of society that had rendered Bibi a social misfit. For the next few months Bibi went silent. The neighbours thought she was dying. And then it was discovered that she was pregnant. She could not tell who did it but it is obvious that some lecher took advantage of her unstable mind. The neighbouring women out of pity helped her deliver a son and taught her how to take care of him. Years passed by, Bibi busied herself in child-rearing and it slowly occurred that Bibi was "cured" (Lahiri, 1999: 172), pinpointing the fact that non-fulfillment of most natural dreams and desires had actually worsened her condition. She could not have normal life because she has been rendered a 'misfit' by society, not a right person to have normal life, and the misfit sets

things right, albeit accidentally, in a way that not only brings health and normality in her life but also puts the so-called 'rightness' of society to shame. Norms of the society are supposed to bring health, harmony, normality, safety and security to individual life and not complicate it as it seems in Bibi's case. The lingering question however is, what would have been the fate of Bibi had the society not declared her a misfit? After all there is no dearth of supposedly normal people afflicted with illnesses and maladies who lead a normal life simply because they are allowed to have it. A fact that only serves to prove the injustice meted out to Bibi.

CONCLUSION:

The above analysis clearly shows that the characters of Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar are rendered underdogs by their respective socio-cultural conditions in which they face discrimination, unfair treatment and bias which lead to their helplessness, powerlessness, subservience and misfortune. They suffer on account of such injustice, a suffering which is avoidable. The stigma and misfortune of being refugee perpetuates Boori Ma's sense of displacement and dispossession, renders her without agency and makes her find herself once again at the mercy of her elements. Bibi is simply rendered a misfit on account of her strange illness over which she has no control. Her desperate cry of being normal except her condition falls on deaf ears and she is considered abnormal and unfit by the so-called normals of the society, thus depriving her of normal life and ordinary pleasures of life which itself speaks volumes about the cruelty, unfairness and prejudice of the society towards its less fortunate. The two stories *A Real Durwan* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*, through the depiction of characters like Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar respectively, present this contradiction of civilized life.

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