

UNRAVELLING IMAGE OF BOORI MA: A CASE OF SUBALTERN WOMAN IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *A REAL DURWAN*

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Abstract: *A Real Durwan* is a short story collection by Jhumpa Lahiri. The story chronicles Boori Ma, a sixty-four-year-old woman who works as Durwan, the gatekeeper and sweeper in an old building. She is a refugee from the 1947 Partition between India and Pakistan. It also portrays the condition of a woman who is 'naturally' considered a second-class citizen in a patriarchal society. This paper uses qualitative research method to support the analysis. Gayatri Spivak, a prominent scholar and critic in Postcolonial studies, describes woman as a subaltern. The subaltern refers to a person who is excluded and silenced in society. Spivak concludes that subalterns cannot speak because of repressive power and domination. Boori Ma is the portrayal of a subaltern woman. She is the main female character who experiences quadruple discrimination in relation to her gender, age, capital, and identity. Ultimately, she remains voiceless and has no choice but to leave her house due to hatred and defamation from an elite group. This paper is expected to examine four categories of discrimination: socioeconomic, ageism, gender, ethnic and culture, and its relation to injustice towards a subaltern woman. In conclusion, it is proved that the subaltern cannot speak due to the never-ending discrimination.

Keywords: *woman; subaltern; quadruple discrimination; patriarchy*

INTRODUCTION

A Real Durwan is one of the short stories from Jhumpa Lahiri's book, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999). This book wins various awards including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian American diasporic writer, recounts the life of a woman named Boori Ma in India. India, in the context of patriarchy, normalizes the norms of patriarchy through social institutions. Patriarchy, in short, glorifies male domination over women. The domination is exposed through the control of men. Women become objects to fulfill men's needs. Therefore, women are more likely to experience discrimination and become victims. Patriarchy in India evolved historically as a result of caste and gender hierarchies. The Brahmanical Code was established along these very lines of caste and gender hierarchies, which further reinforced the patriarchal system (Chakravarti as cited in Thomas, 1996). The suffering and discrimination are also reflected in Boori Ma's story.

To scrutinize women's condition, I choose a female writer whose work can describe the complete analysis from a postcolonial perspective. In Postcolonial Studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak used the term subaltern to refer to women, the socially and politically marginalized groups that are excluded from dominant discourses of power. According to Spivak, subaltern refers to those who are silenced, oppressed, and exploited by dominant social and political structures.

Spivak's definition of the subaltern includes individuals and groups who are denied access to the means of representation, such as women, peasants, indigenous people, and other marginalized communities. She argues that these groups are not simply passive victims of oppression, but they actively resist their marginalization and seek to assert their agency and autonomy. Spivak's work on the subaltern is an important contribution to postcolonial theory and has influenced the study of literature, history, anthropology, and other fields. Her insights into the dynamics of power and representation have helped to shape

our understanding of the complexities of social and political relations in the contemporary world. Subalternity is a position without identity. It is somewhat like the strict understanding of class. Subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action (Spivak, 2005).

The context of discrimination and patriarchy in real life are usually reflected to literary works. Literature is like a mirror, a reflection of social conditions including women suffering in patriarchal world. Boori Ma, the female character in *A Real Durwan*, is a sixty-four-year-old woman who works as *Durwan*, a gatekeeper and also a sweeper in apartment building. She is a Bengali decent. Boori Ma and her family were separated due to 1947 Partition between India and Pakistan. In the history of Indian subcontinent, the partition of the country in 1947 was undisputedly a cataclysmic event which left indelible scar on the psyche of the Indians in general and Punjabis-Bengalis (the direct and worst victims) in particular (Begum, 2014).

As a woman, she does not only face discrimination due to her gender but also her age, capital, and identity. Multi-layered discrimination in this story will be analyzed through four points: socioeconomic, ageism, gender, ethnic and culture. Those aspects are known as quadruple discrimination in this paper. *A Real Durwan* highlights the interconnections between societal prejudices and their impacts on marginalized individuals, especially woman. The story emphasizes the need for empathy, understanding, and the dismantling of discriminatory attitudes to create a more inclusive and just society.

Several studies have been conducted to explore *A Real Durwan* and its relation to women discrimination and postcolonial approaches. Aziz & Hamza (2021) wrote about alienation and various reasons that are responsible for the isolation and dislocation of people due to economic disparity in our system. by using Marxism to describe Boori Ma, the female main character. Also, Tulasi (2020) described about diasporic struggle and identity in the story. It analyzed about Boori

Ma's identity as refugee due to India and Pakistan partition. Others, Pourya Asl & Farhana Low bt Abdullah (2017) also criticized about Panopticon, gender relations, and patriarchy through the analysis of the story. The last article from Sapkota (2021) attempted to investigate the relationship between a subaltern woman and her character, Boori Ma. However, the article did not exclusively elaborate about the subaltern concept in one story, there were two stories used from the book, *Interpreter of Maladies*. These were *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* and *A Real Durwan*. Based on the aforementioned related studies, there is no scholarly article that already examined the female character *A Real Durwan* using the subaltern's theory by Spivak and unraveling Boori Ma's quadruple discrimination. Therefore, the exclusivity of my paper lies in this context.

This paper is expected to examine four aspects of multi-layered discrimination experienced by women in the realm of a patriarchal society. In conclusion, it is proved that the subaltern cannot speak due to the never-ending discrimination.

METHOD

The source of data for this article is the short story entitled *A Real Durwan*. The writer uses qualitative research method to support the analysis. Qualitative research method could explore themes, characters, and literary techniques used in short story. Qualitative research results are heavily influenced by the experiences, perceptions, and personal qualities of the writer. Thus, a critical component involves the investigator being reflective about the data, participants, analysis process, and results. The writer also uses character analysis to unravel the concept of subaltern woman through the female main character of the story. The analysis will go further through four categories of discrimination: socioeconomic, ageism, gender, ethnic and culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Boori Ma as female main character experiences multi-layered discrimination. In

the rest of her life, Boori Ma cannot enjoy living a decent life. She is old and she has to work every day to exchange for her living. Boori Ma lives in an old apartment building with other poor neighbors. Boori Ma, a *Durwan* and refugee, lives alone without her family in a letter box along with bucket and rags, baskets and reed broom. Living a life in an improper place makes Boori Ma unable to fall asleep in peace. There are always problems such as mites in her bedding and her quilts that have made her unable to sleep for days. Although she lives an agonizing life, every day she makes sure that the residents' crooked stairwell is clean. She always keeps her skeleton keys and her life savings at the end of her sari. She also loves reminiscing about her old days and keeps telling her past life to other residents. Although the stories usually are not consistent, it surely hurts no one. Boori Ma lives with poor residents. She is the poorest among all. The residents do not own any properties that are much worth stealing. Despite her condition, Boori Ma has one friend who cares about her condition especially her bedding. Her caring neighbor is Mrs. Dalal. Mrs. Dalal promises to buy a new bed for Boori Ma so that she will not experience nightmares while sleeping.

One day, Mr. Dalal buys two basins for his family. Mrs. Dalal decides to keep one basin in their flat and the other one is installed on the first-floor landing so everyone can use it. The residents are very happy and satisfied with the new installment as their public properties. In the fine afternoon, Boori Ma decides to go circling the neighborhood. She goes to some places. Along her way, she realizes that her skeleton keys and her life savings are gone. She returns to the old building. Then, she finds that the basin is missing. The residents blame Boori Ma for the loss of the basin. They slander her as the one who informs the robbers because she is not there to guard the building. The residents think Boori Ma betrays them for all of their kindness to Boori Ma. At that time Dalal's family goes on vacation so Boori Ma has no one to listen and trust her. Boori Ma begs and gives clarification that she does not tell the

robbers or even steal the basin. She just finishes circling and she also loses her valuable properties during her circling. However, they do not believe in her. At the end of the story, all of her lodgings are thrown away. The residents toss Boori Ma out. She is forced to leave the building.

In this article, the writer will analyze quadruple discrimination that Boori Ma faces by highlighting four points such as socioeconomic, ageism, gender, ethnic and culture aspects. Through these findings, I will also explain the result of never-ending injustice and discrimination that lead Boori Ma as subaltern who are unable to speak for herself. At the end of the story, Boori Ma has to leave her job and her place due to the slander coming from neighborhood. She tries to fight back but she is still a subaltern. She has no power and no place in society.

Socioeconomic discrimination

In this story, Boori Ma is slandered by the residents as the one who is responsible to the missing of basin. The accusation happens due to the fact that she is the poorest among all. The first paragraph of the story proves her poor condition.

BOORIMA, sweeper of the stairwell, had not slept in two nights. So, the morning before the third night she shook the mites out of her bedding. She shook the quilts once underneath the letter boxes where she lived, then once again at the mouth of the alley...That meant that her bucket, quilts, and the bundle of reeds which served as her broom all had to be braced under one arm (Lahiri, 1999, p. 89).

As an elderly, living her life alone is uneasy. She does not also have family besides her. In the context of subaltern, socioeconomic discrimination leads into oppression. Spivak's *Can The Subaltern Speak?* (1988) explained the subaltern cannot truly speak within the existing structures of power. The subaltern's voice is silenced, distorted, or erased by dominant discourses, including academic, political, and cultural frameworks. The subaltern's agency and subjectivity are

constrained by the very systems that perpetuate their marginalization. As a woman, Boori Ma already faces injustice.

Socioeconomic condition in a woman is also related to housing, poverty, and employment issues. The aforementioned excerpt already discussed about Boori Ma's housing condition. Boori Ma is not only woman but also poor. A poor woman in the context of patriarchal society does not have voice. It proves what Spivak described about subaltern. As a subaltern, Boori Ma faces her first layer of discrimination which is derived from socioeconomic aspect. Boori Ma does not also have economic capital to save her life. She is defeated by slanders coming from the residents. No one fights for her life since she is voiceless in patriarchal and capitalistic society.

Poverty is also reflected to her housing condition. As it states:

By now Boori could see some light from the roof spilling into the stairwell. And though it was only eight o'clock, the sun was already strong enough to warm the last of the cement steps under feet (Lahiri, 1999, p. 90).

Woman in patriarchal society tends to be marginalized therefore poverty is the every-day issue in addressing woman's issues. Other than that, the fact that Boori Ma is not only poor but also old and has refugee status makes her vulnerable in patriarchal society.

Ageism

Ageism manifests in stereotypes, prejudices and/or discrimination against older persons based on their age or on a perception that a person is "old." (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2021). Boori Ma is 64 years old in the story. Since she is old, Boori Ma has difficulty to work accordingly. Her body does not fit well in her job as a Durwan.

Lately Boori Ma had been thinking that the stairs were getting steeper;

climbing them felt more like climbing a ladder than a staircase (Lahiri, 1999, p. 89).

As an elderly, she loves reminiscing her past life stories before the partition. She loves telling stories to the residents that her family has a good economic condition.

Aside from her hardships, the other thing Boori Ma liked to chronicle was easier times. And so, by the time she reached the second-floor landing, she had already drawn to the whole building's attention the menu of her third daughter's wedding night. "We married her to a school principal. The rice was cooked in rosewater. The mayor was invited. Everybody washed their fingers in pewter bowls." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 90)

"A man came to pick our dates and guavas. Another clipped hibiscus. Yes, there I tasted life. Here I eat my dinner from a rice pot." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 90)

Sometimes, her stories are not consistent. Due to her age, her memory is limited. Thus, Boori Ma unintentionally talks about inconsistent events yet surely it hurts no one in the building.

Whether there was any truth to Boori Ma's litanies no one could be sure. For one thing, every day, the perimeters of her former estate seemed to double, as did the contents of her almari and coffee boxes. And yet there were days when Boori Ma insisted that she had come to Calcutta on a bullock cart.

"Which was it, by truck or by cart?" the children sometimes asked her on their way to play cops and robbers in the alley. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 91).

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. What kind of landowner ended up sweeping stairs?

Starting from children until the parents and all adults in the neighborhood also question the truth from Boori Ma's stories. However, they consider Boori Ma as an elderly who love talking to people. The most important thing is she can handle her job well. Therefore, people are fine with her existence. However, after the case of the missing basin of Mr. Dalal's family, people start to doubt her and assume her stories are lies. They accuse her of helping the robbers to steal the basin.

"For years we have put up with your lies," they retorted. "You expect us, now, to believe you?" (Lahiri, 1999, p. 103)

This is the statement made by one of the residents. It is the expression for believing all Boori Ma's stories of her past life. They believe that all of her stories are lies. Then, they ask for advice to Mr. Chatterjee, a man who is respected among the residents.

Their recriminations persisted. How would they explain it to the Dalals? Eventually they sought the advice of Mr. Chatterjee. They found him sitting on his balcony, watching a traffic jam. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 103)

"Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*." (Lahiri, 1999, p. 104)

Since the Partition in 1947, the refugee like Boori Ma is labelled as the marginalized or the excluded in society. Her status as refugee, who is poor and uneducated, can be the aspects to highlight her identity as subaltern woman. At the end, this patriarchal society listens to one masculine figure, Mr. Chatterjee since the neighborhood respect his statement. It adds stronger accusation to Boori Ma. His statement wraps up the final decision

of kicking her out from the apartment. In this context, her age contributes to her oppression. Boori Ma cannot make the people believe her. She suffers a lot and has no place to live in.

Gender inequality

As a woman who is old and poor, Boori Ma undeniably becomes a victim of injustice. In the context of traditional gender roles, gender describes a set of qualities that are defined—or socially constructed—in a particular society or culture; when speaking of a person's gender we use words such as masculine and feminine (W.R.Owens, 2005). Masculine is associated with man and feminine is related to woman. Man is usually portrayed as breadwinner, active, leader, and strong. Meanwhile woman is described as caretaker, passive, follower, and weak.

Traditional gender roles also lead into gender stereotyping which depicts woman primarily as caretaker and domestic worker. In the story, Boori Maw is responsible for maintaining cleanliness and order in the building. He takes care of stairs and the maintenance of all buildings. Then, men are portrayed as the breadwinners or authority figures. For example, Mr. Dalal's family. In the story, it is explained that Mr. Dalal is the breadwinner and he has promotion for that reason he brings basins to the family and all residents.

It was Mr. Dalal. The years he had spent filing receipts had left him with purple crescents under his eyes... That his hours filing receipts for a distributor of rubber tubes, pipes, and valve fittings had ended. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 97)

That the distributor himself, who craved fresher air, and whose profits had doubled, was opening a second branch in Burdwan. And that, following an assessment of his sedulous performance over the years, the distributor was promoting Mr. Dalal to manage the College Street branch. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 98)

In order to decide Boori Ma's fate after the missing of the basin, the residents ask for advice from authority figure namely Mr. Chatterjee. He is the one who decides her fate. Boori Ma's fate is determined by the decisions and actions of the male character. It shows the power imbalance. At the end, Boori Ma is not acknowledged as a good Durwan even she has already given her best to clean and guard the building.

...Eventually they sought the advice of Mr. Chatterjee. They found him sitting on his balcony, watching a traffic jam.

The male resident, who holds position of power and authority, uses his privilege to destroy Boori Ma.

As subaltern, woman tends to face oppression. Boori Ma's oppression and patriarchal society are interchangeable concept. Patriarchy enables society to subjugate women. Patriarchy contributes men certain privileges and advantages simply based on their gender. Men have historically held positions of power in social, political, and economic spheres, enabling them to control resources, make decisions, and influence societal norms. This power imbalance perpetuates the subjugation of women. Woman's subordination is rooted in patriarchal systems that reinforce gender-based inequalities, limiting women's agency, autonomy, and opportunities in the context of social, economy, and politics.

Ethnic and culture discrimination

This section will elaborate Boori Ma's identity as a woman refugee. The story describes Boori Ma as the refugee of the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan. The renowned Mountbatten plan was revealed by the Viceroy Governor-General of India on June 3, 1947. According to this idea, India will be split into two regions based on geographical and sectarian boundaries. In order to determine whether the residents of certain regions were in favor of a distinct State that

was independent of the rest of India, it was planned to temporarily demarcate Muslim-dominated districts in the North West and North East of that country. The plan called for the change of power to occur on August 15, 1947, which was a few months from then (Contributed, 1999). The Partition also marked separation between India with majority of Hindu and Pakistan with Moslem majority.

In August 1947, when independence was granted to the former imperial domain of British India, it was partitioned into two countries – India and Pakistan. With no accurate accounts of how many died or lost their homes, estimates suggest that perhaps up to 20 million people were affected by the Partition and somewhere between 200,000 – 1 million lost their lives (partitionmuseum.org).

In *A Real Durwan*, Boori Ma is described as refugee of this Partition. During the Partition, Boori Ma suffered physically and mentally because she did not lose her family but also her comfortable life. When Partition exploded in 1947, the victims, which were from different religious communities, became targets of violence, resulting in a massive loss of life and property. Boori Ma's accent, Bengali accent, also describes what happened in the aftermath of the Partition itself. After the partition in 1947, India was divided into two countries, India and Pakistan, and Bengal was divided into western and eastern regions. The western part of the Bengal province became the state of West Bengal and remained with India, whereas the eastern part of Bengal became East Pakistan (Banerjee, 2015). Later in 1971, East Pakistan renamed Bangladesh and gained its independence.

In Boori Ma's case, all of neighbors in the apartment can easily identify Boori Ma as refugee since she has Bengali accent.

No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear... Boori Ma's claims to prior wealth alongside the more likely account of how she had crossed the East Bengal border, with the thousands of others, on the back of a truck, between sacks of hemp. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 91)

Through this story, Boori Ma is described as refugee who lives in Calcutta or Kolkata after Partition. After 1947, Kolkata grew rapidly along its northern and southern fringes to accommodate the population rise caused by migration from East Pakistan. The second phase of struggle began for immigrants as they attempted to secure a place for themselves in the crowded city. Many refugees settled illegally, occupying fallow lands and empty buildings overnight and resisting police attempts to dislodge them (Bhattacharya, 2022). Boori Ma, in the story appears as the representation of refugee who tries to settle in Kolkata. After her settlement, Boori Ma is poor and he has no one to live for. Then she has a job as a *durwan*. It is the only job that she can work in order to live. Twice a day she sweeps stairwell and also guards the old apartment building.

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. (Lahiri, 1999, p. 89)

After her separation with family members, Boori Ma still keeps her belongings which would remind her about her family. She also had shared her suffering during Partition while cleaning up the stairs. All residents in the old building believe her that she is a refugee. Her refugee status leads the discussion into displacement, alienation, and subaltern contexts. The displacement is seen through her family loss. There, she lives in a small place, warehouse-like. This displacement does not only show the physical loss of her home but also disrupts her social identity and sense of belonging. The second aspect is alienation. Alienation is closely related to social exclusion. Her place symbolizes the exclusion from society since others live in one room per one family. However, she does not have anyone and she did not live in one proper room. Her separation from others is more likely to

engage her subaltern status. To sum up, subaltern status in Boori Ma's story is reflected to the end of her story. She is excluded from society. She is marginalized and she does not have position to speak up for herself.

CONCLUSION

Those four aspects of discrimination as the writer classify as quadruple discrimination which include: socioeconomic, ageism, gender, ethnic and culture are the bullets to reinforce the status quo of Boori Ma's subalternity. Subaltern, as Spivak describes, happens to the marginalized and the oppressed which can be translated into women's condition. *A Real Durwan* portrays the life of woman with various discrimination and tries to fight in her lonesome battle with patriarchal world. The story also emphasizes the perpetuation of power imbalances on how men are portrayed as number one class citizen compared to women.

The traditional gender roles also contribute to the injustice and discrimination faced by Boori Ma. At the end of her essay, Spivak concludes subaltern cannot speak. The end of this story also portrays the same ending where Boori Ma remains voiceless and she has to leave her job and her physical house. Even, her memories and her money are gone. She is alone in this violent world.

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