

Jhumpa Lahiri's Women in "*Interpreter of Maladies*": A Feminist Perspective

Suparna Sinha, Independent Researcher

Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyse some of the women characters of Jhumpa Lahiri's book, "*Interpreter of Maladies*" and infer whether her stories could be termed as feminist literature. The trials and tribulations of her women characters, some of who left their country due to marriage or political reasons have been carefully examined in this article, and compared with the tenets of Feminism as outlined in Mary Wollstonecraft's "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*". A sincere attempt has been made to study the characterization of six female characters of six stories in Jhumpa Lahiri's compilation of short stories in this book. These women are diverse in age, education, financial status, marital status, country of origin, and attitude. They are prosperous immigrants in Boston, like Mrs.Sen in "*Mrs.Sen's*" or a poor refugee from Bangladesh like Boori Ma in "*A Real Durwan*". Some of her women are highly educated like Twinkle and Shobha or educated enough to get a "good husband" like Mrs.Sen and Mala, or uneducated like Boori Ma and Bibi Haldar. Though apparently different, they share some traits in common. They are emotionally fragile, dwell in their 'glorious' past to avoid loneliness and to attract attention, and are seen to be observed and valued mostly for their physical appearance and demeanour, by their men. In short, they exhibit the characteristics and live a lifestyle which Mary Wollstonecraft discusses in her seminal book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. It is for these reasons that Lahiri's debut Pulitzer Prize winning book can be considered as an example of Feminist Literature, which will be my humble attempt to explore in this article.

Keywords: Women Subjugation, Gender Identity, Patriarchy

Introduction

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Jhumpa Lahiri made a phenomenal debut with "*Interpreter of Maladies*", which won her the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. Her narrative is replete with the minutest details which ensconces the readers firmly in the midst of the world of her protagonists that Lahiri is painting with her words. Her stories carry rich details of women and their customs and cultural values; their fears, foibles, and frustrations. Her characters are particularly informed of a strangeness in their lives which has deeper roots, in the feminine psyche, as framed in centuries of oppression of a patriarchal society. The perceptual keenness of the author, from a feminist angle, is unmistakable but seamlessly melded into her mellifluous narrative. She has carefully painted a slew of vignettes pertaining to a specific socio-cultural context pointedly portraying gender narratives in that milieu. Inevitably, the psychological context as a substructure of the socio-cultural milieu gets underlined, further highlighting the dimensions of gender inequity. It is in the detailed delineation of domestic dissensions that Jhumpa Lahiri brings to light the chasm between feminine expectations of an emancipated psychological oeuvre and the shattering reality of an ossified attitude that masculine sensibilities have been bred on, through social reinforcements of tradition over a long history of accretion of such typified behaviour patterns endorsed in India.

Society has always been organized to give priority to the male viewpoints and concerns. And the woman has been characterized as the “lesser” of certain popular binaries like Strong & Weak, Active vs. Passive, Rational vs. Emotional. Mary Wollstonecraft rejected this “weaker” label and pointed out that these pre-conceived notions were a result of the lack of education which ensured that women remained in a secondary and inferior position. Women should be educated so that they can be companions to their husbands, can voice her own opinion, can stand up for what she considers right. Growing in intellectual strength, women would mitigate the issues, is what Wollstonecraft strongly envisioned. She underscored the importance of an elegance borne out of education, for woman, rather than for her to be “virtuous” as predetermined by the patriarchal society.

If the majority of the men in a particular group are aggressive, this aggression is a learned behaviour, as part of their “gender identity” as a man. “Gender roles,” in turn, are the codes of behaviour that a society expects for one gender or another. According to this theory, children see adults model gender-appropriate behaviour, and then their desire to be a member of that society impels them to accept the modelled behaviour as the best. Adopting and practicing a “gender role” is therefore what helps an individual to construct a “gender identity” of who they are. These gender identities seep into the subconscious and the gender roles are played out on autopilot.

It is this “gender identity” that can be seen in the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri. The female characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* display the same foibles, the same psychosocial substructures underpinning the “gender identity” that Feminism seeks to explore. It is this intersection of Feminist thought with the feminine sensibilities of a woman that is explored in this article, with a particular reference to the brilliant tenets espoused by Mary Wollstonecraft in “*Vindication of the Rights of Woman*”. An attempt is also made to briefly include the viewpoints of other outstanding feminist writers of Indian English Literature to bolster the argument put forth. Six characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s book will now be examined in the following paragraphs.

Shobha in “*A Temporary Matter*” is a young and educated woman of thirty-three, who is dealing with life after a miscarriage. The miscarriage has taken a toll on her somatic and mental health. She no longer seems to be bothered about her looks. “... looking at thirty-three the type of woman she’d once claimed she would never resemble” (Lahiri 1). The room that she and her husband Shukumar had set up for their soon-to-arrive baby had haunted her after the miscarriage and she avoided going into that room. This shows the emotional toll the miscarriage had taken on her. Methodical to the core, she plans for groceries weeks in advance, buys in bulk during discounts, and keeps a track of doctor appointments. “She was the type to prepare for surprises, good or bad” (Lahiri 6). But she was not prepared

for the unpleasant surprise, and her life had gone out of order after that. This unpreparedness took a toll on her, and was reflected in her behaviour, demeanour and conversations. Shukumar, on the other hand, hadn’t changed much since the mishap, and he seemed to be pursuing his doctorate disinterestedly as he always did. When he would hear Shobha approaching the room “....he put away his novel and begin typing sentences” (Lahiri 8). Shobha would be under the impression that he was working very hard for his dissertation and would advise him not to work so hard. It should be mentioned here that the pursuit of higher education is predominantly the prerogative of men who could be of any age, interested or not, and still be studying since they are afforded both opportunity and facility to do so. While Shobha is trying to pick herself up after the miscarriage, which she is not able to fully, and yet has to handle an immense workload at office, and bring some work home too. “He thought of how he no longer looked forward to weekends, when she sat for hours on the sofa with her coloured pencils and her files, ...” (Lahiri 5). Work was a distraction for her, helping her tide over the bad times she went through, and also an excuse to let her be away from Shukumar. She also has to look young and fresh, and carry herself with poise as the lack of those “womanly” attributes get noticed by Shukumar. This clearly shows that women are more appreciated for their physical charm, as aptly mirrored by Mary Wollstonecraft, “Men look for beauty and the simpler of good-humoured docility” (Wollstonecraft 126).

This obsession with external beauty and demeanour can also be seen in “*The Third and Final Continent*”. This is the story of Mala who was going to join her librarian husband in the USA after marriage. Mala’s husband is unsure about how his wife would fit in the American culture because she was a quintessential Indian woman, who wore the traditional sari, knew just a smattering of English, and did not know anything about the American way of life. After witnessing an incident on the road, his insecurity about Mala becomes heightened. He sees a dog pull out the free end of an Indian woman’s sari, leaving her startled and terrified. He is petrified that something similar may happen to Mala, when she comes to live with him. After Mala joins him, he is not too happy with her appearance. He seems to need the “approval” of a hundred year old, bed-ridden, mentally unstable, American woman, who likes Mala instantly “She is a perfect lady” (Lahiri 196). This makes him reconsider his previous observations about her, and begins to start liking her. “I like to think of that moment in Mrs. Croft’s parlour as the moment when the distance between Mala and me began to lessen” (Lahiri 196). Not once, in the above story, have her education, skills, or passions been discussed, because they were never thought to be of any relevance to Mala’s husband. To this kind of representation of women we can aptly apply Wollstonecraft and her reference to Rousseau who had outlined a plan for the education of women. “For my part, I would have a young Englishwoman cultivate her agreeable talents in order to please her future husband with as much care and assiduity as a young Circassian cultivates

hers, to fit her for the harem of a Eastern bashaw" (Wollstonecraft 95). In other words, women should have only that much of an education to prepare them to be a pleasant companion to their husbands. In some of the stories of *The Interpreter of Maladies*, the men have emigrated to greener pastures for higher studies or jobs, and the women have been uprooted from their home country, where they were well-ensconced with their milieu, customs, culture, food, amenities, only to be artificially planted in foreign soil, just to take care of their husbands, cook and clean, be presentable, and adapt to the American way of life. This becomes a sort of drudgery for them. Something similar can be said about Tara, one of the main characters in Anita Desai's "*Clear Light of Day*". She had married a foreign diplomat, and was living life according to his wishes. "She felt she had followed him enough, it had been such an enormous strain, always pushing against her grain, it had drained her of too much strength, now she could only collapse, inevitably collapse" (Desai, 23). A striking comparison can be made between such women and soldiers, as previously done by Wollstonecraft. "The consequences are similar; soldiers acquire a little superficial knowledge, snatched from the muddy current of conversation, and, from continually mixing with society they gain, what is termed as a knowledge of the world; and this acquaintance with manners and customs has frequently been confounded with the knowledge of the human heart" (Wollstonecraft 33).

Mrs.Sen in the story "*Mrs.Sen's*" is also living her life like an automaton. Little Elliot, who was taken care by Mrs. Sen was a keen observer of Mrs Sen's daily "procedure". "He especially enjoyed watching Mrs. Sen, as she chopped things seated on newspapers on the living room floor. Instead of a knife, she used a blade that curved like the prow of a Viking ship... Each afternoon Mrs. Sen would lift the blade and locked it into place, so that it met the base at an angle....She could peel a potato in seconds...The daily procedure took about an hour" (Lahiri 115). She is hard-wired into following a dull and monotonous routine. This makes her mind so rigid, that learning a new skill like driving becomes impossible and traumatic for her. Also, she associates her driving with her childhood spent in India. When Elliot's mom asks Mrs. Sen whether she knows driving, she admits that she is a slow learner. "But I am a slow student. At home, you know, we have a driver" (Lahiri 113). So she is sub-consciously unprepared to learn. Contrast this with Jaya's routinized life in Shashi Deshpande's "*That Long Silence*", which gets disrupted after her husband is accused of financial wrongdoings. "With her normal routine disrupted, Jaya can, for the first time, look at her life and attempt to decide who she really is. She rejects the various fixed images into which she wanted to fit: the model bride; the "soft, smiling, placid, motherly woman""(King para 1). Moreover, Mrs. Sen feels that she would not have to do this if she would have been "home". Home for Mrs. Sen is her home in India, and she has a habit of dwelling on her past always. She recounts stories of her

childhood to Elliot. This nostalgia bursts out of proportion when one day after being denied to be taken to the fish market by her husband, a very trivial cause apparently for the readers, she throws out her cache of saris, sobbing uncontrollably. "When have I ever worn this one? And this? And this?" (Lahiri 125). She feels neglected and belittled in her new life. She tells Elliot that her relatives in India want her to send pictures of her new life, but she has no pictures to send, as this is not the life of a queen as her kin might be guessing, where every work gets done in the press of a button. The promised life of abundance and comfort is actually a sad reality of drudgery and monotony.

This reminiscing of the "glorious" past of the native country is also seen in Boori Ma of "*A Real Durwan*". Though Boori Ma is different from Mrs. Sen, in age, financial status, country of origin, and education, she still shares some commonality with Mrs.Sen in her identity and nostalgia. She lives in her past most of the time; just like Mrs.Sen has Elliot as her sounding board, so does Boori Ma have her own set of people, her residents of the building, who give a patient ear to her incessant chatter, mostly gobbledygook of her 'glorious' past. An example of this is her memory of her third daughter's wedding. "She was married to a school principal. The rice was cooked in rosewater. The mayor was invited" (Lahiri 71). She mixes up events, maybe due to her old age, and people even doubt that those events have ever even happened in her life. The reason that Boori Ma spins spiels all the time is to attract the attention of the people around her. She is an old, poor, and lonely woman, who lives on the alms provided by the people of her building, the building which she vehemently guards like a "Durwan" (watchman), and is ironically rewarded for her selfless service by the people of the building, by doubting her integrity and doing away with her eventually.

This craving for attention is seen in Mina of Lahiri's eponymous story "*Interpreter of Maladies*", a young mother of twenty-eight who is starkly different from Boori Ma in most aspects, but shares this attitude of attention seeking. She is lonely by nature, and lives a neglected life, even though she is a young lady of a bourgeois family. "The bourgeois family constitutes the dominant milieu and constructs the primary identity of women...It defines women's identity, literally by conferring upon them the name of the father/husband, by inscribing them within its own class, caste, and religious identity and by prescribing the social roles that they will play in familial terms: daughter, wife and mother"(Rajan 222) Mina gets interested in the second occupation of the tour guide Mr.Kapasi, who works as an interpreter for a doctor, as he knows English and Gujarati, and most of the doctor's patients are Gujarati. She finds his profession as an interpreter, "romantic". This proves that she looks for romance in the most quotidian of things, as she is bereft of it. She was married while still in college; Raj went on with his education and career, while she became a mother soon

after. "After marrying so young, she was overwhelmed by it all, having a child so quickly, and nursing and warming up bottles of milk ... while Raj was at work... Raj never looked cross or harried or plump as she had become after the first baby" (Lahiri 63). Mina was so much occupied in her role as a young mother, that she neglected herself, and was taken in by the charms of Raj's friend, and became a mother to his child, without him or Raj knowing about it. Wollstonecraft asserts "The woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and they cannot have much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is past and gone. Will she have sufficient native energy to look into herself for comfort, and cultivate her dormant faculties? Or is it not more rational to expect that she will try to please other men..." (Wollstonecraft 37) This sort of conquest does not bring any happiness to Mina, and she lives a terrible life of guilt and self-recrimination as she explains to Mr. Kapasi, who she confides in, as she feels that, he may have a cure for her malady. "I feel terrible looking at my children, and at Raj, always terrible. I have terrible urges, Mr. Kapasi, to throw things away" (Lahiri 65). This shows that Mina is an emotionally fragile young woman, whose dark secret of eight years is affecting her peace of mind.

The subjugation of women by men, even if the woman is highly educated, and is a "modern" woman, is seen in "*The Blessed House*". Twinkle has to literally beg Sanjeev to keep a few trinkets which she discovered while cleaning the house where they moved in, and use them as pieces of decoration much to her husband's chagrin. She gets hysteric before he "allows" her. "He had never seen her cry before, had never seen such sadness in her eyes...She went to him, placing her damp towelled arms about his neck, sobbing into his chest, soaking his shirt" (Lahiri 149). After being ridiculed for her quality of writing, and being mocked at her gender for being loud and irksome, Jaya in "*That Lost Silence*" says, "A woman can never be angry; she can only be neurotic, hysterical, frustrated. There is no room for anger in my life" (Deshpande 147). So a woman's tolerance is stretched to the limit and hysteria takes the place of anger, but to little avail. In "*The Blessed House*" Sanjeev's decision reigns supreme. He decides which items to keep, and which to throw away, and Twinkle ultimately compromises by hiding some items from his view.

Women's subjection can also be seen in "*The Treatment of Bibi Halidar*". Bibi is suffering from a strange disease whose only solution seems to be marriage and childbirth. She is mentally unstable, which makes her unfit for marriage. She is despised by her relatives, who ultimately leave her at the mercy of the neighbours. Unlike Boori Ma and Mrs. Sen, she dwells not on her past, but dreams of, and looks forward to her "married" future. "In the windows of sari shops she pointed to a magenta Benarasi silk, and a turquoise one, and then that one that was the color

of marigolds. The first part of the ceremony I will wear this one, then this one, and then this" (Lahiri 163). Though her dreams are never realised, she is ultimately cured of her malaise by a stranger who impregnates her, and she eventually becomes a loving mother and an independent woman. Marriage as an end to 'malaise' is also seen in "*A Toast to Herself*" by Raji Narsimhan. Priya's mother like any other Indian mother, pressurizes her daughter to go for a second marriage. For her Priya's marriage is the most important. Even though Priya is an established author, her mother thinks that her daughter needs to be out of the mess and morass with the help of a second marriage. Her daughter's writing doesn't mean much to the mother. "You'll live like a sanyaasini, then? Your writing brings you pebbles" (Narasimhan).

"*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" was published in 1792. "*Interpreter of Maladies*" was published in 1999. It is indeed disappointing to note that more than two centuries had passed by since the publishing of Wollstonecraft's book, and little has changed in the lives and conditions of women. This shows that emancipation of women is an excruciatingly slow process. The solution which Wollstonecraft provides, is not an easy one because unlike other theories like Postcolonialism and Marxism, Feminism is not unified across continents, as women are vastly different across different cultures. Some capitalist cultures are apparently better off for women than those countries ruled by monarchy. Also the Arab countries have more restrictions on women than the others, so a chance of forming a common platform for all women of the world, where women representatives would meet, motivate each other, learn from each other, and effect a global change, appears uphill.

It is as if the burden of history is being borne by the womenfolk irrespective of the milieu, notwithstanding the socioeconomic context, regardless of technological changes, and this history is firmly a product of an ossified Indian ethos that pays lip service to womanhood as divinity while endorsing the perpetuation of an institutionalised insubordination of the womenfolk. It must be said that the same attitudes of gender discrimination, albeit in attenuated forms, are apparent in the short cameos of the female characters of Jhumpa Lahiri. It can be surmised that cultural assumptions of masculinity and femininity as historically determined in the Indian context, does not get transformed even when the same people move to another clime where apparently, women have had a historic shift towards more equality and liberation. This ossification of mores in the diasporic context further establishes the traditional Indian gender politics.

Wollstonecraft ends her "*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*" by asking women to revolt, saying that they are neither inferior to men nor weak in any way. It is

only because men think them to be weak. If women are independent, and are free from ignorance, they will develop their own understanding, think out of the box, not exist as automatons, and will not be bothered by what men think of their physical beauty. "Self-actualization is possible if a woman decides to be herself, to reveal the genuine value of her free and inborn individuality in its entirety"(Santhi, 3). As a result they will be rational creatures, and this will benefit society at large.

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