

DIASPORIC STRUGGLE OF IDENTITY IN THE REAL DURWAN

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The diasporic Indian English fiction is a significant genre depicting the experiences and outlook of Indian diaspora in a broad sense. It makes room for the discussions in relation to Indian immigrants and offers emotional security to that specific diaspora. Being the representatives of the Indian diaspora, Jhumpa Lahiri addresses the readers of Indian English literature in an insightful, self-effacing style while carrying a sense of the universal experience of immigration. The supposed complexities and uncertainties as a result of the tensions between localities and spatio-temporal dualities is important theme of the diasporic discourse. Already in its inevitable concern with the idea of homeland, the concept of diaspora has also been extended to refer to the mixed or hyphenated identities of persons or ethnic communities and of texts that express and explore this condition, sometimes by employing mixed written and visual discourse.

Lahiri believes that Indian immigrants face humiliating experiences not only in America but in every kind of dominant culture and in other nations. The predicament of Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan*, one of the stories in the collection of Lahiri's work *Interpreter of Maladies* is a fine illustration of this fact. *A Real Durwan* is the story about Boori Ma, a sweeper who migrated to India from Pakistan not only for financial reasons but also for political reasons. Boori Ma means 'big mother' in Bengali, typically this kind of name is given to an old female servant in South Asia. The partition generated a mass movement of Hindus and Muslims from India to Pakistan and vice versa. During this mass migration, a number of individuals lost everything including their identity. The central character of *A Real Durwan* is Boori Ma who took protection in the stairwell of a flat-building in Calcutta and started working unofficially as a 'durwan' of the building and so "In exchange for her lodging below the letter boxes, Boori Ma kept their crooked stairwell spotlessly clean." (IOM73). Not only that, she also started keeping a close watch on the building so that no objectionable element comes in there:

[...] the residents were thankful that Boori Ma patrolled activities in the alley, screened the itinerant peddlers who came to sell combs and shawls from door to door, was able to summon a rickshaw at a moment's calling, and could, with a few slaps of her broom, rout any suspicious character who strayed into the area in order to spit, urinate, or cause some other trouble. (IOM 73).

Over the years, Boori Ma's services came to resemble those of a real Durwan. The Partition of India, the division of British India in 1947, caused havoc in the socio-cultural space on account of the forceful expulsion of the religious minorities. An irresistible sense of loss of 'home,' separation from relatives, death of near and dear ones and cropping up of a deprived marginal refugee class were some of the consequences of the Partition of India. The brunt of these dreadful experiences was so severe even on the next generations. The sufferers of Diaspora and partition share the universal space i.e. the margin or the third space where efforts have been made to repress, demarcate and throttle their voice on the one hand and a strong challenge comes about to counteract that hegemonic force and to put voice to the marginalized themes, on the other.

For the tenants, the partition and its story of suffering are things of the past and so they are excited to listen to the old woman's tale of loss and homelessness. Undoubtedly, she was a person in exile but the stories sounded incredible because such stories gave an account of loss of amazing wealth, the facts of which changed each day:

It was with this voice 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 confusion had separated her from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood almari, and a number of coffee boxes, whose skeleton keys she still wore, along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari (IOM 71).

Despite her desist 'Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you can't even dream them,' no one felt annoyed. The neighbourhood had compassion for this lonely individual, the upshot of a historical incident-the Partition of India and her ultimate loss of family and 'home'. They made an effort to help her in their small individual manners. She had right of entry to any family of the building. She was no stranger to anyone and

everyone continued to do one's own household "business, scolding children or adding up expenses or picking stones out of the evening rice" in her presence. (IOM 76).

The sense of displacement, immigrant experience, lack of communication, diasporic experiences and human maladies are the major themes noticed in the works of Lahiri. It is evident that Lahiri's characters symbolize the embodiment of a fractured identity. Boori Ma does not have a name because she has lost her identity and is forced to do menial chores. She only earns the nickname "Boori Ma", which could be said to speak of the whole of destitute women in a similar position. Lahiri presents the lives of the Indians in exile, who frequently vacillates between the ethnically bound roots and the world they migrate to settle. Boori Ma's alienation from a former life was not of her choice but it happened due to the turmoil of partition, and whether her memories of a previously luxurious life are true or not, she is now homeless and dependent on "the kindness of strangers."

For her, her past self of a rich man's wife of East Bengal is essential than her present identity as a sweeper in Calcutta city. She cannot disregard her identity connected with her original homeland. She left behind a wealthy life in Pakistan for a poor life style in India. This story is thematic of the dilemma of the lower class social stratum due to forced diaspora and political struggle. In exchange for her services, the residents allow Boori Ma to live on the roof of the building. While she sweeps, she tells stories of her past: her daughter's extravagant wedding, her servants, her estate and her assets. She cannot forget her identity related with her first homeland. She asserts:

Yes, there I tasted life... 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 (IOM 71).

The inhabitants of the building couldn't understand on how to react to Boori Ma's tales. But, the residents were not aloof to her and considered her as a real entertainer. Mrs. Dalal, one of the residents, had a soft corner for her. She assured to get her new bedding when she observed the torn condition of the one she had been using. Mr. Dalal was also concerned about Boori Ma as he thought of her extreme descent in status from being a likely landlord in the past to a sweeper at present. Jhumpa Lahiri underlines the impossibility of an exile sharing emotional pain and loneliness to others through the portrayal of Boori Ma:

"Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched; instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city" (IOM 76)

When Mr. Dalal is promoted at work, he improves the structure of the brick building by fixing a sink in the stairwell and a sink in his home. When the Dalals were away, the other residents try to improve the structure of the building. However, while Boori Ma is out one afternoon, the sink in the stairwell gets stolen. The residents blame on Boori Ma for informing the robbers and for her inattention at her job. According to them, "This is all her doing". The residents carry her up to the roof and accuse her of telling robbers about the new basin. She tries to convince them, but in vain. The residents seek the advice of Mr. Chatterjee. He comes to the conclusion that the building needs a "real durwan" to keep their valuables safe:

So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her baskets and reed broom, down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma. All were eager to begin their search for a real durwan. From the pile of belongings Boori Ma kept only her broom. "Believe me, believe me," she said once more as her figure began to recede. She shook the free end of her sari, but nothing rattled. (IOM 82)

They throw Boori Ma out on the street with all of her belongings also thrown out. Thus, on diasporic lines, alienation and identity crises are the themes of the story. Alienation and identity crises deal with the idea of dislocation because Boori Ma is displaced from Pakistan to India. She lost her financial and economic identity. Arunoday Mukherjee says:

In the beginning of the story, Boori Ma is introduced as a refugee and at the end of the story we see her again as a homeless exile. Perhaps the writer wants to prove here that the geographical displacement is not the only condition for an exile, a person may lose his identity even in his native land in this selfish and materialistic world. (154)

Boori Ma serves as an interpreter of her own identity and class status, "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes, but she is the product of changing times' was the refrain of old Mr. Chatterjee" (IOM 82). At the end of the story, a basin is stolen from the building and Boori Ma is expelled from that building. The basin becomes a symbol of her alienation and separation as she is thrown out shortly thereafter.

References:

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