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## Sanskritization and Othering in Jhumpa Lahiri's Short Story "A Real Durwan"

JAGDISH BATRA

O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat

Literature has, from the very beginning, been complicit with psychology and philosophy even as it interacted with other disciplines later like so many tributaries feeding a big river. Confining ourselves to psychology, we find that starting with George Eliot and George Meredith in the 19th century England upto novelist Anita Desai in contemporary India, scores of writers have given us psychological insights into a variety of characters and social structures and processes. Literary critics too have banked upon theories by psychologists like Freud, Lacan, Jung, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Felix Guattari, et al. The speciality of literature is that shorn of psychological jargon, it presents case studies in an interesting format. One such literary piece is the story "A Real Durwan" in *Interpreter of Maladies*, the collection of short stories which won Jhumpa Lahiri the Pulitzer Prize.

The Persian/ Urdu word 'Durwan' is now part of English lexicon and means a person whose duty was initially to guard the entrance to the durbar (court) of a king, but now it is used for any guard on duty at the gate of a hotel or a big building. In the context of this story, however, the term has been used ironically as the guard here is to secure an apartment block that houses people apparently from lower middle class. The story is set in Calcutta; the residents here are bitten by the bug of desire to move socially upward or what is known as Sanskritization<sup>1</sup> in sociological terms; the durwan here becomes a coveted symbol.

Ironically however, the durwan here is not a hefty male guard, as the name would suggest, but a frail old woman. She is called Boori Ma which by itself is a typical Indian term, meaning old mother. Any old woman may be addressed as 'boori ma' in India out of respect. This address compensates for the loss of identity that a name could bring to her. Nobody knows her real name; nor do they feel curious about it. Having been displaced from that part of Bengal which became East Pakistan at the time of Partition of India, she is without any family and is dependent for support on the inmates of the apartment block where she has her lodgings and which she guards.

This building has a staircase leading to the top of the third floor, which Boori Ma regularly cleans with her broom. The story starts with the description, "Boori ma, sweeper of the stairwell." That's her identity, very tersely put by the writer. The point of view is of the outside world. Ma's living quarter is the floor of the stairwell near the main gate so that she is always guarding the gate even when she is taking rest after a hard day's work. Going up and down the four flights of the staircase is no easy task for her at the age of sixty-four. The turmoil is getting tougher by the day. Ma's background is revealed through her monologue as she sweeps the stairwell and the staircase twice every day. Her misfortune lay in the Partition of the country which had separated her from her husband, four daughters, a two-storey house 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" (71). Losses had made her extra cautious about this bunch of keys that had become the keepsake of her happy past.

It was a routine now: By the time she reached the second-floor landing, she would have completed the narration of her third daughter's wedding night, for the benefit of the residents: "We married her to a school principal. The rice was cooked in rosewater. The mayor was invited. Everybody washed their fingers in pewter bowls. . . . Not a delicacy was spared. Not that this was an extravagance for us. At

our house, we ate goat twice a week. We had a pond on our property, full of fish" (71).

She had led such a royal life that her linens were of muslin and the mosquito nets were as soft as silk. Her soliloquy would continue:

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. . . . 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. (71)

An old person who has had such a tragic fall would normally be excused for this kind of reverie but the residents were doubtful about her claim not only because of its loftiness but also because "the perimeters of her former estate seemed to double, as did the contents of her almari and coffer boxes" (72). Sometimes she claimed she had crossed the border of East Pakistan into India on a hemp-laden truck and at other times, she would refer to a bullock cart and the children would pester her about the inconsistency. She embellished almost everything.

The only proof that she flaunted of her erstwhile palatial house left behind in East Pakistan was a bunch of keys. The response of the residents of the flat building follows the Rashomon effect as seen in the multiple perspectives on Boori Ma. Old Mr. Chatterjee thought she was the "victim of changing times" and Mr. Dalal was doubtful: "what kind of landowner ended up sweeping stairs?" Many women believed that "she probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family" (72). The consensus reached was that "Boori Ma had once worked as hired help for a prosperous zamindar back east, and was therefore capable of exaggerating her past at such elaborate lengths and heights" (73). Her periodic outbursts were treated as "entertainment" by the residents of the building. The intention all along was on locating the antecedents of Ma rather than trying to ameliorate her misery. As

her monologues indicate, Ma's mind is shaken; it plays games. With the horror of Partition being a part of her life, one in her condition was liable to lose mind but the residents had either a superficial understanding of the infirmities of age or there was something more to it.

Boori Ma, thus, as a character, is highly disempowered and alienated. There are several factors against her: she is a woman, is old, is alone with no relative, and belongs to a different region that is now another country. Her past is linked to the horrors of Partition of India in which like millions of other people, she lost her all. The only link joining her to the community is the Bangla language, the dialectical nuances notwithstanding. She migrated and thought of settling in Calcutta on account of this affinity. In fact, the Government of India too had considered it a wise step to settle the refugees of Partition in localities where their language was spoken even if there were dialectical differences. It happened in case of refugees from West Punjab, the part of Punjab that went to West Pakistan. Most of them were settled in the then East Punjab on the Indian side.<sup>2</sup>

As indicated before, the residents of the flat building conform to the stereotype of lower middle-class people who aspire to moving upward in social hierarchy. Therefore, when Mr. Dalal gets promotion at workplace, he gets a wash basin fitted in his house and also gifts one to the neighbourhood, to be fitted on the first-floor landing for the benefit of all, but more importantly, to impress whosoever might happen to visit the newly appointed "Manager" of the College Street branch that Mr. Dalal now was.

Rumours spread quite fast in society. Just as the residents guess about the exact status of Boori Ma, they also entertain rumours of Mr. Dalal having applied for phone and having bought a lot of household items to placate his wife who did nothing but "wash her hands in her [wash] basin all day" (46). The womenfolk in the building were full of jealousy for them and rumours started circulating of the newly acquired riches of the Dalal family—that

Mr. Dalal had bought two kilos of mustard oil, a Kashmiri shawl, a dozen cakes of sandalwood soap" besides applying for a telephone line (79). In this building, few people showed sympathy to Ma though Mrs. Dalal had a soft corner for her.

The residents liked the wash basin immensely and considered it a step towards upward mobility. Later, when the Dalals went to Shimla for vacation, out of jealousy or the spirit of positive rivalry, the residents swung into action, scraped finances and started a sort of campaign to renovate the building. As the workmen swarmed the building all the while, Ma thought it prudent to shift her belongings to the roof braving the rains.

She did not now feel the need to guard it, so she started wandering outside the building. In one such jaunts in College street, her life savings and keys were stolen by some pickpocket. Around the same time, in the building also a theft took place so that when she returned, she was greeted with the news of theft of the wash basin and the allegation that she was responsible for it. After all, when she was supposed to be guarding the gate, she had been wandering on the road. When Ma protested her innocence, the inmates overruled her and concluded that she was a liar, and a thief to boot. Nobody paid attention to how her planned pleasure trip outside had misfired and what a great loss she had suffered.

Ma's belongings were thrown out and the search for a new Durwan began because as Mr. Chatterjee, the "wizened old man," after listening to the arguments of residents, pronounced his judgment that they now required "a real durwan" (82), which meant a hefty male, liveried guard, since having tasted the initial steps towards their upward mobility, they now craved to climb higher on the social ladder. So, Sanskritization stood out with its 'other'—pauperization of the old woman. The process of Sanskritization operates at every level as the people look up all the while to emulate the ways of the people in the higher echelons of society. There is also a view that the stories told by Ma were actually fake but the claims of a rich life in the past indicated a desire on her part to

be considered worthy of respect—a marker of Sanskritization! But even if this argument was accepted, how does it give license to people to look down upon those who have the misfortune to be at a lower rung of society? Is it riches that should decide the status of a person in society—is the moot question.

In India, people above the age of 60 were around 8.6% of total population in 2011 and are expected to rise to 13.1% by 2031 according to a report (Zompa). It is an unenviable situation in which people like Boori Ma are placed. Lahiri has brought to the fore in a very empathetic manner the predicament of a person who is thrice marginalized babbling wo(hu)man, presently placed at almost the lowest pedestal in social hierarchy that is founded on economic status only and suffering on account of the skewed attitude of a snobbish community. In psychological terms, Ma is suffering from MCI or Mild Cognitive Impairment (Carole 177) as a result of the trauma that she suffered during Partition. In order to be identified with the upper class, the residents wish to forget their own past and deride any reminder of it which Boori Ma provides. In this, while the reaction of the Ma is natural, that of the residents is a 'put-on.'

We've seen that an in-group mentality prevails in the building. Sociologists are of the view that "every in-group constructs out-group stereotypes" (Bierstedt 291) which is a facile and superficial construct, somewhat in the nature of self/ other construction pointed out by Edward Said in his famous work *Orientalism*. The community needs to consider if the in-group mentality is sufficient guard against deceit or chicanery? Don't members of the same group indulge in thievery? Again, Ma is treated as an out-group member. Is a sound moral attitude meant for in-group only? Which would mean that social morality is not acknowledged *per se*, but practised to avoid ostracization within the group because they don't care about the response of the out-group. Ma's worth is recognized due to the element of interdependence, but one theft, and she is shunted out lock, stock and barrel. Selfishness is writ

large here and the so-called cultural behaviour is easily given a short shrift. This brings us to the second inference that culture is practised in certain situations where they don't have to sacrifice their own interest.

Lastly, this is also an issue relevant to the wider understanding of culture in the Indian context. Culture is always in flux and its transformation is happening, from the old Indian pattern wherein the old people are respected and taken care of, into a rather westernized one wherein age-care homes are supposed to be normal abode of the elderly by children. A humanitarian approach without linkage to material considerations is needed. Only when we appreciate the spiritual aspect of our cultural legacy, look within to locate the common bond of humanity that the destitutes like Boori Ma will be taken care of by those who are well off today.

## NOTES

1. Sanskritization as a term was used by sociologist M.N. Srinivas for the first time in his 1952 work on the people of Coorg area in India. Since then, it is widely used in sociological studies. By it, he suggested the tendency among the lower castes to adopt the practices and customs of higher castes believing that it would raise their stature in society.
2. In "Coping with the Aftermath of Partition: Some Personal and Impersonal Narratives," I noted: "At the time of Partition, the Indian government did what it could to settle the migrants here. . . . The best thing it did was to earmark areas for settling *en masse* migrants belonging to the location they had left behind. Thus, after settling the refugees in transit camps, the residents of West Punjab in Pakistan got shifted to various cities/ towns in East Punjab in India: from Alipur to Sonapat, Multan to Karnal, Jhang to Rohtak, Frontier Province to Faridabad and so on. This was done to provide these unfortunate people with some solace in the company of those whom they knew or whose culture they shared" (*The Partition of India: Beyond Improbable Lines*, ed. Daniela Rogobete and Elisabetta Marino. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub., 2018, 15).

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