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REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN LAHIRI'S FICTION

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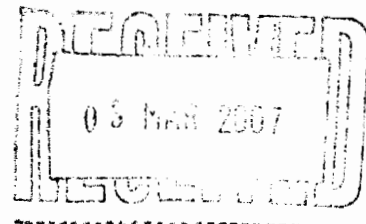
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Abstract

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Feminism is a broad subject, which has many divisions and debates within itself. Many types of feminisms will be explored, their differences and similarities will be stated. Postcolonial feminism will be especially focused. After the theoretical discussion, some major female characters in two of Jhumpa Lahiri's books, *The Namesake* and *The Interpreter of Maladies* will be analyzed through a postcolonial and "Third World" feminist perspective. The focus of this paper will be on the different experiences of women and how they live their lives in a patriarchal society.



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Chapter 1

Introduction

All systems in the world are patriarchal and women all over the world suffer oppression in their daily lives because of this fact. The roles that have been bestowed upon women, those of mothers and wives, have also served as an agent of the suppression of their own desires and voices. Feminists and feminist critics have worked in recent decades to redefine roles, give voice to those who are viewed as “lack”, or “other”. There are debates within feminists about the types of theories and approaches that should be applied while deconstructing patriarchal systems and recreating new systems where women of all types are included. In some parts of the world, mainly in third world countries, domination of women is more prevalent than in other places. One type of theory, a hybrid of postcolonial studies and feminism is postcolonial feminism. The study of postcolonial feminism attempts to review the dynamics of the oppressions of third world women and aims to give voices to these women. Postcolonial feminism also makes prominent the experiences of these women to the rest of the world. Sub continental feminism is a subdivision of this subject and examines the dynamics of colonialism and patriarchy that oppress women. The paper will first examine many approaches, concepts and major innovations of the studies of feminism and feminist criticism. The notions of “third world” and “third world feminism” will also be defined and taken into account.

Subjugation comes in individual, familial and societal forms but patriarchy is always the catalyst. The systems that a woman interacts with are all dominated by capitalism and patriarchy. A woman grows up within these systems and is conditioned to ignore her own desires. Through literature we are able to clearly see different human experiences. Since this study will review the postcolonial experiences and representations of women, the focus will be on some of the major

female characters in Jhumpa Lahiri's fiction. *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake* illustrate a diverse group of women who come from different backgrounds and live very different lives. This study will also examine the types of repressions they encounter in their lives and the ways they accept and deal with their fates. Before the analysis of the characters, the paper will study different feminist views and theoretical concepts. The study will also take into account recent psychoanalytical theory to further examine the advantages and disadvantages of motherhood, marriage and family that these characters experience. Additional theory on third world women will also help bring into focus the suppressions Lahiri's characters have to face.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Background

The study of feminist literary theory is a direct result of the women's movement, which took place in the 1960's. The movement propelled the need for the image of women in literature to be reinvented, and is concerned with the two processes of "conditioning" and "socialisation", and their relationship with the terms. (Barry, 121). Feminist criticism is a relatively new field, and has been developing only in the last few decades. New types of feminisms have evolved over the past few years, and each of these feminisms deal with different "others". A new sub field that aims to include voices and experiences that Western criticism cannot relate to is called postcolonial feminism.

Toril Moi, in the *Feminist Reader* terms "feminist" as a "political position", "female" as a "biological matter", and "feminine" as a set of culturally defined characteristics. The way women are represented in literature is thought to be a form of "socialisation", since literature provides role models in society. Literature and its female characters therefore define the acceptable codes of feminine behaviour and aspirations.

British, American and French feminist critics deconstructed 19th century literature and illustrated how female characters were portrayed. Most female characters were passive and if they had a role in the narratives at all their lives were ultimately determined by marriage. The status of a woman's husband determined a woman's own success and social position. For example, In Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, girls were expected to get married as they grew up. Jo, however, rebelled, by pursuing her passion for writing and by foregoing the chance to get married. Jo's ideas made her a rebel in her own society, since the notion of women with career

goals was alien at the time the novel was written. Jo's actions carry different implications in today's context than during the time the novel was written. This change in expectations of readers is a reflection on the way ideologies and thoughts have evolved. The roles of women have changed, and this revolution is largely because of the evolution of feminist studies. In the 1970's, feminist criticism aimed to evaluate the socio-cultural mindset of men and women. Feminist critics exposed the dynamics of a patriarchal society which leads to gender inequality. Particularly focused were male writers whose work contained and constructed stereotypical images of women. The aim was to dispel the myths about a woman's condition and aims circulating in society. (Barry, 122) In the 1980's, the aim of feminist criticism shifted in two directions. Firstly, it became multi-disciplinary by drawing from other types of criticism such as Marxism and structuralism. Secondly, the focus shifted from criticising male discourse to finding and redefining the female experience. A need emerged to reconstruct a new canon, which included female writers who were previously neglected. The movement was therefore on its way to give women a new voice and image.

2.1 The Role of Theory

Feminist critics have always been divided over the amount and type of theory that should be highlighted. Anglo-American feminists are particularly sceptical about recent theory and use it cautiously. Theorists such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar follow the paradigms of literary realism, treating literature as an expression of women's roles and experiences which can be compared with reality. Each text is closely read, and even though this approach is similar to the liberal humanist one, these feminist critics also take into account

historical and non-literary texts such as diaries, journal entries etc. This form of criticism is more “American” than “Anglo”. In complete contrast to the Americans, “French” feminism is much more theoretical. They have “adopted and adapted” post-structuralist and psychoanalytic criticism and made it the core of their work. Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray often go beyond literature. They deal with the linguistic, symbolic and psychoanalytical aspects of a text. (Barry 124, 125).

2.2 Feminist Criticism and Psychoanalysis

Juliet Mitchell, in *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) makes a distinction between the terms gender and sex. While sex is a biological trait, gender is a social construct. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) also expresses the same view. Unlike Kate Millet who criticizes Freud (in *Sexual Politics*, 1969) for being too patriarchal, Mitchell defends Freud by saying that he views the feminine as “given and natural”. A person’s sexuality is formed by one’s early experiences and Freud shows the process by which this happens.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar terms “social castration” as a woman’s lack of power in a male-dominated world. In *Mad Woman in the Attic*, they confront the images of women that are created by men. According to them two primary women archetypes exist of women; the angel and the monster. Referring to Virginia Woolf, they say that women must “kill” these ideals. In the same essay, Gilbert and Gubar refer to Sherry Otner who explains that in all societies, there is a “symbolic ambiguity”, where there are several archetypes that women are associated with. Some “subversive feminine symbols” are witches, evil eye and castrating mothers. The “transcendence symbols” include mother goddesses, mother nature etc. (Rivkin, Ryan; 596-609).

A term closely associated with the feminine is the body. Historically the body has been associated with the female, feminine and women and thus viewed as unclean, weak and immoral. Kristeva connects the mind and body, culture and nature, matter and representation. She theorizes that bodily instincts are excluded in representation and that the process of signification already runs in the material body. In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva terms the bodily drives as a “pivot between the soma and psyche”. (Oliver, “Kristeva and Feminism”). Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic and symbolic make up the process of signification. The semiotic element refers to the bodily drives and is associated with movement, tones and rhythms of signifying practices. It is closely linked to the maternal body, where we first experience our rhythms, tones and movement first as human beings. The symbolic element refers to the grammatical structure of signification. The symbolic makes room for references. For example, the symbolic structure of language gives words their meaning. On the other hand, words give meaning to life (non-referential meaning) because of their semiotic context. Without the symbolic, there would be no signification and without the semiotic, words would be meaningless to us. Because bodily instincts are related to signification, the logic of signification already functions within the body. The identification and differentiation operations are pre-determined by the body. Before birth, these functions are regulated by the mother’s body and during infancy, by the mother. Kristeva suggests that the maternal law is determined before the paternal law, which Freudian psychoanalysis has always prioritised.

Kristeva rejects the Freudian-Lacanian notion that paternal threats cause the child to leave the mother’s body. She emphasizes the maternal role in the development of subjectivity in culture and language. She argues that in Western culture there aren’t enough maternal discourses, even though maternal law precludes paternal law. Religion, especially Catholicism,

makes motherhood sacred, while science reduces motherhood to nature. In *Motherhood* **A**ccording to Bellini, she suggests that the maternal role cannot be labelled as mother, feminine **o**r woman. She identifies the mother's relation to the infant as a function, and separates this role **f**rom love or desire. She suggests that either man or woman can fulfil the maternal function. She **i**nsists that the maternal body operates between nature and culture and even when the mother is **n**ot the subject or agent of pregnancy and birth, she still has a voice. She calls each human being **a** subject-in-process, because we are always negotiating the "other" within. Like the maternal **b**ody, we are never completely in control of our own experience. In *Powers of Abjection*, Kristeva's notion of abjection deconstructs the dynamics of oppression. She explains abjection as **a**n operation of the psyche, which constitutes subjective and group identity and excludes **a**nthing that is a threat to one's borders. Abjection is related to the maternal function. In order to **g**rasp our own identity, we must all leave the maternal body. But for women, abjection is **i**mpossible because their identity is embedded in the maternal body. Women, therefore, develop **a** "depressive sexuality". In *Black Sun*, she suggests both a need for a new discourse of maternity **a**nd a discourse for mother-daughter relationships. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva says that misplaced **a**bjection causes women's oppression. Because abjection of the maternal function is necessary to **b**ecome subjective, maternity and femininity are suppressed within the patriarchal structure. (Kristeva, 374). In *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva notes that there are three phases of **f**eminism. She rejects the first phase because of its tendency to overgeneralize equality and **o**verlook sexual differences. She criticizes Simone de Beauvoir for her rejection of motherhood, **a**nd instead in *A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident*, argues that "real female innovation (in **w**hatever field) will only come about when maternity, female creation and the link between them **a**re better understood (298)." Kristeva also rejects the second phase of feminism of a completely

feminine language. She disagrees with the argument that language and culture are patriarchal and should be abandoned. She insists that culture and language are based on speech and women are primarily speaking beings. She, however, agrees with the third stage of feminism, which seeks to redefine identity and difference and their relationship. This phase refuses to prioritise either and instead tries to explore multiple identities, and multiple sexual identities.

2.3 Postcolonial Feminism

When Western, or “first world” theorists try to generalize the experiences of women, they often exclude women in other parts of the world who come from different socio-political backgrounds. Postcolonial feminists have therefore criticised Western feminisms for failing to include the experiences of third world women in their theories and in recent decades have come up with a new branch of study.

The concept of third world has many different definitions. Third world writing such as Lahiri’s fiction illustrate experiences and differences in identities third world people inherit. Spivak tells us that the term “third world” was invented in 1955 by those who belonged to the “old” world order:

“...the initial attempt in the Bandung Conference (1955) to establish a third way—neither with the Eastern nor within the Western bloc—in the world system, in response to the seemingly new world order established after the Second World War, was not accompanied by a commensurate intellectual effort. The only idioms deployed for the nurturing of this nascent Third World in the cultural field belonged then to positions

emerging from resistance within the supposedly 'old' world order—anti-imperialism, and/or nationalism”. (Spivak, 270).

In *The Politics of the Possible*, Sangari is critical of the way the West uses the term to label and group together places that differ vastly both culturally and geographically:

“Third world is a term that both signifies and blurs the functioning of an economic, political, and imaginary geography able to unite vast and vastly differentiated areas of the world into a single 'underdeveloped' terrain” (217).

In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* Cheryl Johnson-Odim says that the term Third World is used in two ways:

“...to refer to 'underdeveloped'/overexploited geopolitical entities, i.e. countries, regions, even continents; and to refer to oppressed nationalities from these world areas who are now resident in 'developed' first world countries.”

Johnson-Odim further identifies problems some Third World women have with First World feminism:

“While it may be legitimately argued that there is no one school of thought on feminism among First World feminists -- who are not, after all, monolithic -- there is still, among *Third World women, a widely accepted perception that the feminism emerging from*

white, middle-class Western women narrowly confines itself to a struggle against gender discrimination” (314, 315).

Western feminist critics have often been criticized for the use of the term “third world women”. Mohanty uses the term to explain “women of colour”. She argues,

“what seems to constitute ‘women of colour’ or ‘third world women’ as a viable oppositional alliance is a common context of struggle rather than colour or racial identifications. Similarly, it is third world women's oppositional political relation to sexist, racist, and imperialistic structures that constitutes our political commonality” (7).

Although she uses the term “third world women,” Mohanty argues that Western feminisms categorize “third world woman as a singular monolithic subject,” resulting in a “discursive colonization” (51). Additionally, western feminisms propel a discursive colonization through the production of “third world difference”: “...something that apparently oppresses most if not all of the women in [third world] countries” (53-54). Western feminisms' use of the category of third world woman and third world difference are a part of a larger, latent cultural and economic colonialism.

Self-defined third world women who hold a place within first world feminism are also criticized. Suleri claims that Mohanty's view that “...only a postcolonial subcontinental feminist can adequately represent the lived experience of that culture—points to the great difficulty posited by the ‘authenticity’ of female racial voices in the great game which claims to be the first narrative of what the ethnically constructed woman is deemed to want” (760).


In conclusion, the terms “third world” and “third world women” are constantly evolving.

These terms cause a lot of controversy not only between first world feminisms and third world women, but also among third world women themselves.

Postcolonial feminists believe that gender oppression is not the primary form of oppression. Women who have been subjected to colonial rule have suffered racial, class and ethnic oppressions, along with gender discrimination that Western women cannot relate to. Postcolonial feminism therefore seeks to explore colonial domination and the oppression of women by examining colonial histories and the experiences of women during those times. In *Strategy, Identity, Writing*, the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raises the notions of national and personal identity. She abandons the claims that identity is inscribed in language, location or biology. She also says that Western feminists need to unlearn their ideas of privilege and take into account the fact that a woman's position depends on her own socio-political background (35-49).

In *Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box*, T. Minh-ha Trinh raises important issues concerning third world women, or "women of colour", particularly about their relationship with language and identity and language and writing. Trinh writes in an accessible style and challenges the universalization and patriarchal nature of literature. She criticises first world feminists for imposing a monolithic identity on women which excludes "women of colour". She blames them for the fact that women cannot be defined (5-44).

In *Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition*, Sara Suleri criticizes North American postcolonial academic feminist writers who term the postcolonial condition as an "abstraction." Suleri posits two types of realism. The first is found in postfeminist theory, autobiographies, and personal narratives, and the second is located in "lived experience." The article asserts that certain narratives are more representative of the postcolonial condition than



others (757-769). Audre Lorde, in "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference"(Rivkin, Ryan; 630-636), criticises the power that Western history has had over the rest of the world. She identifies the neglected voices as "Black and Third World people, working class people, older people and women". It is this group of people, the others, who are expected to bridge the gap between the oppressed and the oppressors. "Black and third world people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men." In the America that she knows, Lorde says that there is a "mythical norm" defined by those who are white, male, young and heterosexual Christians. White women and coloured women differ because while the former has access to certain privileges the latter does not. The other's traditions are too strange to be comprehended by those who belong to the "mythical norm" group. White women often ignore the differences in culture because they feel guilty. To them, the other's culture is inferior. Location also plays an important part in determining one's identity.

Adrienne Rich, in "Notes Towards a Politics of Location", starts her essay with this opening line: "I am able to speak these words in Europe, but I have been searching for them in the United States of America". She also refers to Virginia Woolf's statement: "As a woman, I have no country...As a woman my country is the whole world." Rich comments on the way feminism has been dealt with in the past, accusing the West of leaving out experiences that need to be known. She, like Kristeva, also rejects universals. She seeks to find a place where women have actually been able to completely be women. The female body hides the real woman, and women are subjected to a place and perception because of that body. And that is what she refers to as the politics of location. After birth, one is labelled in terms of one's physical gender, and race by both black and white people. Identity is therefore socially determined. White theorists, she says, have often read from the theory of coloured women and perceived the views as attacks

against the white. Rich ends her essay on the same note she started by asking, "Once again: Who is we?" She hints at the fact that universals are unrealistic and that there are no conclusions.

Whatever the type of feminism, thought is expressed and influenced by language, which is gendered, a notion which was first proposed by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*. Feminist theory is a multifaceted, multidisciplinary subject, which stems from the very human need to be included. Each type of feminism relies on the socio-political conditions that these groups belong to. Each group has different realities, stemming from differences in culture, age, race and social status, which dictates feminist positions, shapes their thoughts, and determines their perception of, and by, the entire world.

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Chapter 3

Representations and Conditions of Postcolonial Women

Postcolonial feminist literature illustrates the many experiences of women who are excluded from mainstream white literature and theory. Subcontinental narratives talk about these women, their experiences as third world citizens in first world countries. Jhumpa Lahiri in her narratives presents a spectrum of women who have varying experiences but all share a common desperation to find their own identities. In *Interpreter of Maladies* Lahiri threads together a pattern of characters who share contrastive destinies. Shoba, a grieving mother breaks away from her marriage, whereas Bibi Halder, the ailing woman, is desperate to find a husband and family of her own. Boori Ma longs for her glorious past while Mrs. Das hides a secret that threatens her present and future. This chapter will also study Mrs. Sen, Mala from *The Interpreter of Maladies* and Ashima, from *The Namesake* together because these women share similar destinies and circumstances that lead them to America. Their own desires have no place within Indian tradition and they are forced into lives that have been shaped for them first by their families and then by their husbands. They go to the land of dreams not for their own benefit, but to support their husbands, sacrificing their own lives in their birthland to fulfil the wishes of their parents and to support their husbands. They hang on to their memories and try to replicate the same flavours, smells and sounds in their new homes. Lahiri's work contrasts Mrs. Sen's struggles with Mala's and Ashima's ability to adapt to a new culture. But all these women have a hunger for acceptance and fulfilment and try earnestly to be complete.

3.1 Loss and Marriage

"A Temporary Matter" shows how a woman deals with grief after losing her baby.

Carol Ruth Blackman says that:

“In marriage two become one by turning to each other. In grief, two often turn away from each other, becoming isolated and lonely. Bereavement makes us very self-centred at the exact time our spouse needs support (“Marriage Survival After Losing a Baby”).

Shoba and Shukumar decide to deal with their grief separately, instead of communicating to each other all the emotions each go through. As Blackman also says in her article, the loss of a baby has different meanings for the men and women. Both feel like failures but for utterly different reasons. For men the feelings come from the fact that society expects men to be protectors. Women feel like failures because they are natural nurturers and after a loss, they feel they could have prevented the baby’s death. Shoba and Shukumar decide not to deal with their marriage together and in the process, disconnect from each other physically and emotionally. Blackman also reveals that:

“Men tend to talk for practical reasons while women tend to talk for recreation. Men talk about something, come to a solution then go on. Women want to talk about what has just happened. Finding a solution is not as important as knowing that someone is listening (preferably her husband)”

Shoba and Shukumar do not talk at all until the blackout. And since there is no communication, the couple cannot move past the loss and grief. Shoba does not share her feelings and instead of knowing all the details and talking them out, she insists on not knowing the sex of the child. She does not let Shukumar understand her needs and because he does not make an attempt to talk to

her, she feels that he is not there for her. Their inability to communicate from the beginning of the loss turns into a habit of ignoring each other. The result is a lot of unexpressed emotions that make them resent each other. While Shukumar deals with the resentment by silently ignoring her and spending time in the den which she never visits, Shoba decides to temporarily leave her husband. Blackman says that during this time, marriage can be saved by avoiding certain dangers. One such danger is change. "Stability is gone once the child dies and daily chores become 'memory-filled' challenges". Shoba stops taking care of the house because the chores she once used to do so meticulously remind her of the baby and family she will never have. Blackman says that other dangers are "not meeting the spouse's need for love" and to "survive alone". For women the need for love includes tenderness and understanding while for men the needs include sexual intimacy. Conflicts arise since women feel that sex is wrong so soon after the loss of a child. Shoba never receives tenderness and understanding from her husband and he just lets her be by herself, so neither grieves properly and their marriage suffers. The couple does not share sexual intimacy until the time the power goes out and they are forced to communicate. Talking helps them temporarily since they interact as a couple and share emotions and relive the moments when they first fell in love. But the readers, if not Shukumar, are surprised when Shoba reveals that she will move into her own apartment. And since Shukumar does not convince her to stay, they silently agree to move on alone. Shoba and Shukumar fall into all the dangers that Blackman summarizes. They try to cope alone while still living together and in the process disconnect from each other.

Kristeva's theory also explains Shoba's reaction to the loss. In *Motherhood According to Bellini* Kristeva proposes the idea that the maternal function is separate from all others and women should not be labelled as mothers just because they might fulfil this role. Before the birth

of her stillborn baby, Shoba never has to consciously deal with the fact that she functions in many roles. After the birth Shoba stops functioning as a social being and separates herself from the roles she must play. She works when she's at home, stops socialising and even stops communicating with her husband. She distances herself further when she secretly starts looking for her own apartment.

Kristeva also suggests that a woman is constantly negotiating with her "other"¹. Shoba's repressed identity is that of someone who doesn't have to coexist with anyone so that she could be in complete control of her own life. Even though she wanted to be a mother and was already a caretaker to her husband, Shoba repressed the part of herself that was selfish, but that "other" comes out when she loses the baby. Her child symbolises the maternal function that she was supposed to fulfil. Being a mother is a social duty, a rite of passage for women of her culture and background, and when she fails to live up to these expectations Shoba stops caring about the other roles she must also perform. She instead becomes the person who must be looked after because her husband, even though he now neglects himself, is left to do the things for her (such as making her dinner) that she no longer does for herself. Shoba's character represents all women who have not only suffered the loss of a child but those who have repressed desires. Her repressed grief causes tension in her marriage and her desire to grieve properly is also another reason she wants her own space. Even though Shoba stays away from her husband for most of the time, she still has no room in their house for her own use. After their baby dies Shukumar turns the baby's room into his den, knowing that Shoba avoids the room, and he would be left alone. Every other room in the house is meant for the couple to share. Shoba develops a depressive sexuality² because she finds it difficult to cope with the pressure of trying to be a

¹ See "Feminism and Kristeva" by Kelley Oliver.

² The notion of depressive sexuality is derive from *Powers of Abjection* by Julia Kristeva.

functioning wife and mother when all she wants is to reclaim her own life. That is the reason she moves out of the house and abandons her crumbling marriage. The title of the story suggests that the matter is only temporary. The phrase of course comes from the notice that the couple gets from the electric company, telling that the power outage is only temporary. But readers don't know whether the title refers to the marriage, the moments during the power outage when they actually communicated, or the separation.

3.2 The Aged and Helpless

In "A Real Durwan" Boori Ma is an old woman who lives and works in an old run down building as a sweeper and a durwan and takes pride in her work. She tells the other tenants stories of her glorious past, which they refuse to believe because the stories are always embellished and the details keep changing. The Dalals are fond of Boori Ma and take care of her. When they go on vacation Mrs. Dalal offers to get Boori Ma a new sheepskin blanket, something she really needs. While the couple is away the other tenants plan renovations for the building. Because of the traffic of people Boori Ma has to move from her usual sleeping spot. She also starts going outside to the markets and spends her life savings on street snacks and one day her keys are stolen. When she goes back to the building the others accuse her of "informing the robbers" (81) and they throw her out. Boori Ma has nowhere to go. She loses everything all in one day, including her home, her job, her money and her neighbours.

Boori Ma's story is obviously not a happy one. If we see Audre Lorde's insight³, we can say that Boori Ma is marginalized not only because she is old but also because she is a casualty

³ See Audre Lorde's "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" in Rivkin's *Literary Theory: An Anthology*".

of the postcolonial world. She does not fit into the mythical norm of her society which expects women to be married, have families and belong to someone. Her own people neglect her because she has no family of her own and has to depend on others for the most basic of needs. Nothing belongs to her except the clothes she wears, which are also given to her by the tenants. Her embellished stories are a way for her to reject what everyone believes about her; that she is nobody. Not even the other tenants know her real background; all they know about her is that she is a refugee. She is rootless and displaced in a superficial home where the other tenants humour her but are irritated by her at the same time.

Rita Manchanda in her essay “Gender Conflict and Displacement: Contrasting ‘Infantilisation’ of Forced Migrant Women” talks about the experience of displaced women, thus:

“The forcibly uprooted from the social and political communities—refugees, stateless persons, escapees from violent and natural and man made disasters—are configured by the internal state system as the alien, the marginalized and the ‘rightless’. In the state system the rights or the right to have rights flow from being recognized as a citizen. The woman refugee...represents the epitome of the marginalization and disenfranchisement of the dislocated. Her identity and her individuality are collapsed into the homogenous category of ‘victim’ and community devoid of agency, unable and incapable of representing herself, powerless and superfluous.”

As Manchanda suggests, Boori Ma is uprooted from her normal life, family and her home after the partition of India. Her rootlessness makes the other tenants ignore her rights. They do not treat her as an equal citizen and only see her as a victim. They ignore her individuality by not taking her stories seriously by disregarding her needs.

She is undoubtedly a victim and others treat her as such. Even though the tenants themselves aren't wealthy, they can still afford basic amenities such as food, shelter and clothing. Boori Ma on the other hand, has to rely on donations from the tenants. As Manchanda points out, Boori Ma is superfluous and the donations she receives are also superfluous objects that belong to the neighbours who no longer want the items. She does not belong to anyone and nothing really belongs to her. While everyone in the building has family, she is alone, without any obligations or responsibilities. Boori Ma tells her embellished stories to prove that even though she is nothing at the moment, she once used to have a glorious and luxurious life.

Even though the author does not elaborate on the circumstances that bring Boori Ma to the building, we can assume that the tenants, especially the Dalals, allow her to live there out of pity. Even though she makes a temporary home there, she is still rootless and has no blood relations. She is therefore powerless and poor. Her attempt to make herself a part of the community results in a loss of individuality. She concocts elaborate stories to link herself to a past and relate to the other tenants. She has no identity and is not even known by a name.⁴ The tenants refer to her by a label: "Boori" meaning old woman and "Ma" to signify a false sense of respect for the old woman. Boori Ma tries to overcompensate for her lack of identity by taking on more than her share of the maintenance work of the building. She tears off strips off her sari and bedding to keep the banister clean. She tries to earn her keep by being more caring.

The Dalals are the only ones who show any affection for Boori Ma. When they are on vacation, the other tenants take advantage of their absence to make renovations to the building. The crowd of workers drive her away from her usual spot and she starts roaming the streets for exercise. The outings are a good change for her because she usually confines herself to the

⁴ See Spivak's notions of national and personal identity.

building, mainly because she has no real reason to go outside. Eventually she spends her life savings and the keys to the gate of the building are stolen. When the building is robbed, she is blamed and thrown out. She suffers mental abuse at the hands of the other tenants when they throw her out. They find it easy to blame her since she is old, vulnerable and powerless, as her only allies are away. The American Medical Association⁵ defines elderly mistreatment as:

“An act or omission that results in harm or threatened harm to the health and welfare of the subject. Abuse can include the intentional infliction of physical or mental injury, sexual abuse and withholding necessary food, clothing and medical care.”

Boori Ma is once again displaced as the other tenants abuse her. Because of their abuse, she loses her shelter, food and care of any kind. Lahiri ends the story with Boori Ma's pleas to let her stay and be believed. But they are indifferent and eager to find “a real durwan”. A refugee once again, Boori Ma is forced to leave with only a few belongings. The only things she takes with her are the clothes she is wearing and the broom she sweeps with. The broom symbolizes both hope and oppression in a young, patriarchal world. With the broom as a tool she may be able to find work elsewhere as a sweeper and a durwan, but that is the only type of work she will ever be able to find.

Like Boori Ma, Bibi Haldar is also rootless and longs for her own family. She however finds a purpose in the form of motherhood.

⁵ For more information on the types of elderly abuse, see Griffith.

3.3 The Cure of Motherhood

Bibi Haldar shares the same anxieties of starting a family. In “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, Lahiri shows the value that society puts on marriage and family. Bibi Haldar is sick throughout her life with an undiagnosed and incurable disease. Her mother dies while giving birth to her and her father a few years later. After his death, Bibi starts living with her cousin Haldar and his wife who treat her like a burden and an outcast. Like Boori Ma, Bibi has no immediate family. She works at her cousin’s cosmetic shop without any pay. When she is almost thirty, doctors tell her that marriage and “relations” will cure her. Bibi is conditioned by the women in her neighbourhood to want marriage and family. Lahiri illustrates the depth of Bibi’s desire for marriage in the following lines:

“ She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life...she wanted to serve suppers and scold servants, and set aside money in her *almari* to have her eyebrows threaded every three weeks at the Chinese beauty parlour (Lahiri, 160).”

Bibi associates marriage with housekeeping and keeping herself beautiful for her husband. She thinks that this is the purpose of a woman’s life. All her attention goes towards finding a husband. The Haldars discourage Bibi because she is never taught to be a woman. “The illness had left her naive in practical matters (Lahiri, 163).” Such matters include being informed about current events, cooking, sewing and knowing how to wear a sari. Even though Bibi is literate she is ignorant about world affairs because she stopped her education after the ninth standard and the Haldars never let her watch television.

When Haldar's wife becomes pregnant, Bibi is even more ignored. After the baby is born and winter sets in, the baby gets sick and Bibi is blamed. She is again sent to the storage room and becomes isolated and depressed because she also stops socialising. The neighbours run the Haldars out of business and they move away, leaving Bibi with a little money and a store full of old products. A few months later the neighbours find her pregnant but she never reveals the father. When her son is born, she manages to run a business out of the shop and raises her son. The birth of her son finally cures Bibi, even though being a single mother is unconventional in her society.

Michael Merzenich, a brain scientist at the University of California, explains how motherhood can provide emotional benefits because having a baby is a "revolution for the brain". (Staff, "The Mental and Emotional Benefits of Motherhood"). He says that raising children is mentally enriching and the bond that is formed with the child can "yank" one out of a "mental rut". Before the birth of her son, Bibi is clearly in a rut because she feels hopeless about her own condition, but the birth cures her.

In the same article, Staff quotes Katherine Ellison who testifies that motherhood increases one's "emotional intelligence" and helps parents, especially mothers, to "grow, acquire wisdom and become fully human." Stephanie Wilkinson and Jennifer Niesslein in "What Motherhood Does to and for You" also illustrate the many benefits of motherhood. They quote Sociologist Sharon Hays, who says that for single mothers (like Bibi) who come from poor backgrounds, the bond with their child becomes an important source of love and support. This is because marital prospects for these women are lower and the relationship with the child becomes a primary one. By caring for her son, Bibi learns to take care of herself. She gains an understanding of the concepts of obligation and responsibility and manages to run a business

from the small amount of resources that the Haldars leave her. In the article, Hays talks about how motherhood saves women. She gives examples of women who come from impoverished backgrounds who have kept themselves away from prostitution and thievery because of their children. She says that motherhood “grounds” women and turns them into “moral leaders”.

Wilkinson and Niesslein assert that motherhood is an opportunity

“to deepen your hold on life, on the future and on the past. For the most part we can’t remember what it was like when we were very young. Playing with our children, measuring their growth, caring for their bodies—all of it is a reflection...of what it was like when we were little.”

Since Bibi has no memories of her own mother her bond with her child helps to compensate for her lack of a childhood and motherly love. Motherhood changes Bibi in many ways; it makes her a responsible adult, and she becomes self-supporting and unselfish. She thought her cure would be a husband but she finds out that what she really needed was someone she could constantly care for, and someone who would provide her with a purpose and give her unconditional love.

3.4 Motherhood, Marriage and Entrapment

Motherhood doesn’t have the same effect on all women. While for some it is enriching, for others, it becomes an entrapping experience. In “The Interpreter of Maladies” the Das family is on vacation from America to India. They are a young family of parents who are in their late

twenties with three young children. The young couple keep arguing and the young children are loud and uncontrollable. Mrs. Das gets close to the tour guide Mr. Kapasi who tells her that he works as an interpreter at a local hospital. Mrs. Das confesses her secret to him; her husband did not father one of her sons. She explains her desperation at being a mother and a wife. She regrets getting married and starting a family so soon because she had to give up the chance to finish her education and start a career of her own and desperately searches for her own identity and hangs on to it by keeping a secret that she can't share. The end of the story sees Mrs. Das accepting her fate again when a monkey hurts her son. Even though a sense of hopelessness haunts her from time to time, she responds to her natural instincts to protect her child. Mrs. Das is therefore a prisoner to her own wants. She wanted to marry her childhood sweetheart and she wanted to have her children and when she got these things she wants to be free, and when she thinks her child is hurt she is a prisoner to her motherly instincts.

In the story, Mr. Kapasi is taken with the young and very Westernised Mrs. Das. He is even more drawn to her when she confesses her secret to him, and starts imagining further interaction that they might have. Mrs. Das confides in him because he is a complete stranger and she knows that she and her family will never cross paths with him again, after their Indian vacation is over. She explains her mental state at the time of the affair that resulted in the conception of her son. Instead of freeing her, the affair adds more to her burden. She not only has to take care of another baby, she also has to carry a secret.

“Who Has Affairs and Why”⁶ offers many explanations of why people have affairs. The site explains that sometimes there are forces within a person that pulls them towards affairs. One of these forces is “excitement or risk.” As Mrs. Das explains to Mr. Kapasi, she and her husband

⁶ See Dearpeggy.com.

had been childhood sweethearts and were married when they were very young. She gave up her youth and career to raise her family, and she was obviously troubled by the choice she had made. She explains that in the beginning, their relationship had been exciting because they hid it from their parents. But with marriage came the strain of family life and she was tired, bored and frustrated. When her husband's friend comes to visit and makes advances towards her, she gives in to the excitement. Mrs. Das also required the same feeling of risk she once had with her husband. Several forces within Mrs. Das also pushed her towards the affair. One such force is "boredom" (www.DearPeggy.com; "Who Has Affairs and Why"). She is bored in her marriage because she is a young spirit who is oppressed by the housework and child rearing she has to do. She subconsciously wants to punish her husband because she blames him for impregnating her and confining her to the life she currently lives. Even though she mothers the children, she fulfils the maternal function resentfully. The once-passionate love affair she used to have with her husband is now a reminder of the imprisonment she has to encounter everyday. Mr. Kapasi notes the irritation and unpleasantness between the two. The sullenness is a direct result of the resentment Mrs. Das has for her husband. On the trip while he is busy taking pictures and enjoying his vacation with the family, she disengages herself from her family as much as she can.

She tells Mr. Kapasi her secret because he is the only person on the vacation who was not a member of her family. She also finds similarities between herself and Mr. Kapasi. Both of them have given up their dreams to support their families and are both trapped in unhappy, unfulfilled lives. She is also attracted by their completely different lives, on two opposite sides of the world and trusts the distance to carry the burden of her secret. To her, the vacation is an obligation because she still has to be with her family and take care of them. The trip is also a

liberating one because she is able to unload her secret on a stranger. In the telling of her secret, she once again betrays her family. Instead of placing her trust with her husband and children, she confides in someone she has no chance of ever meeting again.

Lahiri portrays Mrs. Das as a tortured soul who, like Shoba, is constantly negotiating the “other” within⁷. She hides the part of herself that does not like being a mother and a wife and her suppression of her inner desires lead to the affair. She is trapped by circumstances of her own making and there is never any hope of freedom. Even the sharing of her secret provides temporary relief because she continually has to lie to her husband and children everyday.

3.5 Sacrificial Brides

Many women sacrifice their birth families and familiar surroundings to get married. Mrs. Sen in “Interpreter of Maladies”, and Mrs. Sen, and Mala, and Ashima in *The Namesake*, have left behind everything they love to lead married lives. They come to a culture that is completely alien to them to start lives with complete strangers who are legally their husbands. They make large sacrifices for the success and happiness of their spouses while they stay at home and attempt to replicate the home that they know. The marriages of these three women can be further understood by some feminist views, which show conflicting attitudes towards marriage. Sexually correct feminists believe that “marriage oppresses women and that family breeds patriarchy.” (“Marriage and the Family: An Ideological Battleground”). According to what McElroy believes, marriage and family are both results of capitalism. The essay explains the dynamics of the family and marriage and how they oppress women. In society marriage and

⁷ See Kristeva’s *Motherhood According to Bellini*.

families work to keep order. Traditionally, the woman stays at home, produces children and takes care of the family. Because of the care his wife provides, the husband is productive in his workplace and thus generates capital for society. Children also grow up to be the next generation of workers.

The essays also shows the different views on marriage in two schools of feminists. Gender feminists believe that women in marriage are oppressed. Liberal feminists want the institution of marriage to be reformed, while gender feminists want marriage itself to be abolished. Another issue that concerns feminists is the distribution of housework. McElroy explains:

“Liberals generally view housework as a problem in the division of labour...they see an imbalance in the amount of domestic chores performed by women as opposed to men. The solutions offered by liberals are often individual and private, rather than public or political. For example, couples are encouraged to work out schedules that more fairly divide the labour. Men are encouraged to share the load equally.”

Gender feminists on the other hand believe that housework is a direct expression of man's oppression of woman. The characters of Ashima, Mala and Mrs. Sen are defined by their roles as housewives, which include housework. They come to America for the same reason; to support their husbands and raise families in America. Since they leave their birth families back in India, the women are homesick. While Mala and Ashima eventually settle into their new lives, Mrs. Sen never does. She confides in Eliot about how she misses everything about India. Her only link to India is the food she cooks, the music she hears, and the letters she occasionally

receives from her family. Preparing elaborate Indian meals and snacks, and taking care of Eliot give her a sense of purpose. Mrs. Sen's identity is inscribed in her house. Because she has no children, she can't call herself a mother. She chooses to babysit as an attempt to fulfil the maternal function, and because there are no other opportunities available to her. While driving is a symbol of independence and freedom, Mrs. Sen views it as confinement to a life in which she is already unsettled and confused. Driving the car reaffirms the limitations imposed on her in America, somewhere she does not want to be, and exposes her to a confusing environment. Her only motivation to learn driving is that it will enable her to buy fish. Because she is an inept driver, she gets into an accident and loses her job as Eliot's babysitter. The loss symbolizes the loss of purpose. She is now unemployed and alone in her house during the day when her husband is at work. She is left alone with her memories of India and her family. She is in America against her own will and even her husband is not there during the day to support or comfort her. She has no friends or family and is completely lonely. Her marriage therefore confines her to her house and housework.

Mala also shares the same experience at the beginning of her life in America. She is self-conscious in front of a husband who is almost a stranger and finds herself in a country that is utterly different from her own. Because marriage also subjects her to an alien culture and life, she is forced to find purpose in housework. When she comes to America her husband is surprised to come home and find the house clean and "smelling of steamed rice" (192). Mala then immediately assumes her role as a caretaker and wife. She takes on all the housework since her husband no longer helps her, even though he used to maintain his home before her arrival. As Mala and her husband grow older and more accustomed to their lives in America, they have children and Mala feels more settled. She eventually falls in love with her husband and is "happy

and strong”(197). In the end, she becomes secure in her relationship with her husband and a successful mother to her son who goes to Harvard.

Like Mala and Mrs. Sen, Ashima in *The Namesake* comes to America for her husband. She is also unsettled at first. Like the other two women, she misses and tries to replicate the feeling of India. She raises her family and also clings to India by socializing with other Indian families and reminisces about home and her past life. At first, her identity is also etched inside her house. She takes care of the housework and her children and entertains guests with Indian food. But as her children grow older she becomes more accustomed to American life and finds her own voice and place. She learns how to drive and becomes much more independent. Ashima also finds work in a library and earns money for herself. The job gives her the same sense of purpose she used to get from taking care of her family. Like Mala, Ashima is able to outgrow her homesickness as she makes a new home. But unlike other characters in Lahiri’s fiction, Ashima experiences widowhood. When her husband dies suddenly she manages to be strong and cope gracefully with his absence. She mourns his death but is secure in her relationships with her children she never feels alone. Ashima draws on the skills she has learned throughout her years in America and keeps herself strong. But ultimately she realizes the home she spent so many years building no longer exists. Her children have lives of their own and live away from her. For the first time in her life, she is alone in the house that she raised her family in. Ashima decides to sell the house with its family’s history and moves back to Calcutta with her brother. She realizes that now she has two homes; one which she was so reluctant to accept and one she had spent years pining for. Ashima’s identity was once rooted in her Indian heritage but now it is rooted in her husband. Without him, the American home is different. She leaves because she had

achieved what she sets out to do: raising a family and supporting her husband in America. When her reason for living in America dies, so does the purpose for her being there.

Marriage and family life oppress Ashima in some ways. First it tears her apart from her roots and brings her to a place she does not want to be. Marriage brings her to a culture completely alien to her in the beginning. Her devotion to her family strengthens her ties to the alien culture. In the end, the death of her husband frees her. She is able to go back to her family and her roots and to a lifestyle that is a part of her natural identity.

Throughout her life in America, Ashima goes on to work at a library and is settled with her husband while both her children have lives of their own and live on their own. When her husband dies, she becomes unsettled once again. She is forced to move back to Calcutta to live with her brother for six months of the year. She is sad because now she has two countries to call home. Packing up is a strange feeling because she reminisces of the years she has spent building a home in that house and realizes that her definition of home has changed. She used to pine for India. Now realizes that she will miss America and the life she has built.

Ashima's marriage gives her independence, something she did not expect. She comes full circle at the end of the story. Her family is complete, she is independent and her children are starting their own lives. Even though Ashima is sad about leaving her life behind she is content with her life.

In her two books Jhumpa Lahiri gives readers a glimpse of women who undergo all sorts of struggles and experience different anxieties. Their successes and failures are determined by the support they get from their friends and families and the way they react to their environment. As women of two worlds these characters have to cope with conflicting values and apply a set of values in a culture that isn't theirs.

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Chapter 4

Conclusion

Lahiri's fiction depicts the different experiences of women who belong to a postcolonial world who are suppressed in some way or the other. Shoba, in "A Temporary Matter", feels like a failure because she fails to produce a child, and therefore fails to live up to the expectations of her husband, the society she lives in and the beliefs she was taught. Motherhood is a role that all women, especially those who come from the third world, are expected to play. Societal expectations make her a prisoner and after the loss of the baby she rejects her marriage and husband, thus rejecting all of society's purpose for her. Bibi Haldar, in "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar", on the other hand does accept motherhood but rejects the idea of marriage in the end. Because she does not fit into the "mythical norm" of her society that expects brides to be beautiful, healthy, skilful and affluent, she is an outcast. She defies tradition by becoming a single mother, and is cured from her mysterious illness. Bibi Haldar is a new type of female hero. She is able to find her own source of happiness without subjecting herself to societal expectations.

Mrs. Das, in "Interpreter of Maladies", unknowingly falls into the traps of love and motherhood. She gets married because she falls in love and expectedly has children. But the pressure overwhelms her and she regrets the sacrifices she has had to make. Mrs. Das is torn between the traditions; the values of marriage and family she inherits, and between the values she learns of individual wants that come from her upbringing in the Western world. The two

different forces confuse and oppress her. Her expression of frustration results in an affair and a child. The burden of the secret and the responsibility of another child only add to her entrapment.

In "A Real Durwan", the tenant of the building discriminate against Boori Ma because she is old and alone. Her old age is a weakness and the people around her never acknowledge her individuality. To them, she has no rights because she is a refugee, and an old woman without a family. They look at them with pity. Boori Ma's story has a sad end when she is forced out of the home that she never really belonged to. She now has no place to go and with only a broom in hand, she must find a new way to survive. Boori Ma's story shows us how women who do not fit into the mythical norm are discarded by society.

Mrs. Sen, Mala and Ashima have no identities when they are sent abroad to start their lives with husbands who are really complete strangers. But the three of them face different fates and deal with their situations differently. Mrs. Sen is lonely and lost in a new world. She is oppressed in the new world because she is not able to earn her own living and is only able to babysit. But the normal ways of American life, such as driving, confine her to her home even more. She is therefore nothing if not a housewife. Mala and Ashima cope better with their situations. Even though they too struggle at the beginning of their lives in America, these women eventually give in to their fates and adapt. Mala gains a little independence by getting a job at a library and by earning her own money and having a life that is separate from her family and home. Ashima also adapts and in the end, she is independent but alone. She raises her children and completes living the life she was sent to live in America. When her husband dies, she goes back to the life she used to pine for, her real home.

All of Lahiri's female characters have to struggle. Some of them overcome their obstacles and try to find their own place within a male-dominated world. For women like Boori Ma and

Mrs. Sen, the patriarchal, political systems succeed to isolate them. Literature is a reflection of society and Lahiri has successfully managed to depict the real life experiences of many subcontinental women.

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