

Eastern Women in Jhumpa Lahiri's

Treatment of Bibi Haldar, Mrs. Sen's, and A Real Durwan

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This Paper applies Gayatri Spivak's critique of Western feminism on three of Jhumpa Lahiri's short stories and the female figures of these stories; moreover their complicated conditions are discussed in detail. It is discussed how the cultural and social differences between East and West has put the third world women out of the feminist theories. In Lahiri's stories the sisterhood which is the core of the female communication in the East has been depicted so delicately and in the following pages the researcher has dug into the deeper layers of this culture.

"Spivak can be said to be the first postcolonial theorist with a fully feminist agenda. That agenda includes the complexity of female writers with imperialism" (Bertens 211). However, Moore-Gilbert says one of her main themes is her constant criticism of Western feminism "for its failure to 'dehegemonize,' even decolonize, its own guiding presuppositions" (455). Spivak's main contribution to the world's feminism is her consistent objection to Western feminism regarding its ignoring third world women. She particularly challenges the claims of feminism to speak for all women. She recognizes a tendency in some French feminist theories to explain the experiences of 'Third World women' "in the terms of western

female subject constitution. Such an approach clearly ignores some very important differences in culture, history, language and social class" (Morton 73).

Spivak writes in her "Can the Subaltern Speak?", "It is well known that the notion of the feminine (rather than the subaltern of imperialism) has been used in a similar way within deconstructive criticism and within certain varieties of feminist criticism" (82). She tries to rearticulate the history and lives of female subaltern in different essays such as "French Feminism in an International Frame" (1981), "Three women's texts and a critique of Imperialism" (1985), "The Rani of Sirmur" (1985), and "Feminism and Critical Theory" (1986). Sanders in his book, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak Live Theory* (2006) explains that:

The third world woman, with whom Spivak does not claim identification, stands as a limit – to knowledge, to any vanguardist politics. Although she will be summoned in Spivak's writings by other names – 'native', 'subaltern', for instance – the limit that she figures becomes a permanent one. (78)

Spivak writes in her "Feminism and Critical Theory" that "My own definition of a woman is very simple: it rests on the word 'man' as used in the texts that provide the foundation for the corner of the literary criticism establishment that I inhabit" (49). She believes that we should accept this idea without any prejudice. She continues "'Man' is such a word in common usage. ... I therefor fix my glance upon this word even as I question the enterprise of redefining the premises of any theory" (49).

In her critique on French Feminism, Spivak condemns Julia Kristeva (1941-) for her *About Chinese Women* (1977) and accuses it with narcissism. That means this book implies that 'Woman' is understood as "being white, heterosexual, and middle-class, in a manner analogous to the way that in traditional humanism, 'Man', was constructed in similarly narrow terms" (Moore-Gilbert 455). Spivak argues that in *About Chinese Women*, the white woman is exploiting the third-world woman for the reason of self-constitution the same reason as that of the long history of colonialism ("Three Women's Texts" 247). She asserts that "International Feminism" is the idea of developed West. She rejects the individuality of Western feminism and believes in the sisterhood between women. She suggests another approach for the third world women instead of Western feminism, she states that "The [Western] academic feminist must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by our superior theory" ("French Feminism" 136-137).

Jane Eyre is one of the texts referred to in the title of Spivak's essay, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism". "Spivak's reading of *Jane Eyre* traces a hidden imperialist sub-text in Jane Eyre's narrative of bourgeois female individualism" (Morton 86). In her influential reading of Bronte's novel, Spivak questions the Anglo-American feminist reading of it "which celebrate Jane's heroic narrative of self-determination to the exclusion of Bertha Mason's colonial genealogy" (Morton 86).

Moore-Gilbert contends that the principal problem of Anglo-American feminist reading of this novel in Spivak's idea "is that the role played by the nonwestern woman in this narrative of empowerment tends to get forgotten" (455). Spivak attempts to remedy this forgetfulness by demonstrating how Jane effaces Berta Mason, Rochester's wife, who represents the female subaltern or the woman from the colonies. "For Spivak, this sets the pattern for Western feminism's (non)engagement with its nonwestern sisters" (Moore-Gilbert 456).

Spivak's polemical reading of *Jane Eyre* firmly situates this cult text of Western feminism in the great age of European imperialism. The cultural and literary production of nineteenth-century Europe, she argues, is inextricable from the history and success of the imperialist project. Thus, and insofar as feminism seeks its inspirational origins in this period, it must also reconsider its historical complicity with imperialist discourses. (Gandhi 91)

Minha Trinh (1952-), the post-colonial feminist thinker, believes the sisterhood of western feminists with all women around the world is a great lie because such sisterly assertion disguises an ... ideology of separatism ... the consciousness of difference sets up an implicit culturalist hierarchy wherein almost inevitably the 'native woman' suffers in contrast with her western siblings. By claiming the dubious privilege of 'preparing the way for one's more "unfortunate" sisters', the western feminist creates an insuperable division between 'I-who-have-made-it and you-who-cannot-make-it. (86)

Spivak, Writes Morton, in "French Feminism in an International Frame" challenges the French feminist idea of "the valorization of women's non-reproductive sexual pleasure" and examines to see if that is a suitable political goal for third world women (83). Then she

goes on to reject the French feminists' objection to clitoridectomy in some parts of Sudan. Spivak questions the Eurocentric assumption that clitoridectomy is exclusively a ritual imposed on 'Third World' women 'in remote and primitive societies' ("French Feminism" 151). She asserts that the repression of female sexuality is symbolically a clitoridectomy which is prevalent across the world and does not belong to the third world women. "Clitoridectomy thus refers to the symbolic effacement of women's non-reproductive sexual desire as a way of reproducing patriarchal dominance" (Morton 86).

"A Real durwan" is about a sixty four-year-old woman, Boori Ma, who is the cleaner of an old building in India. She retells stories of her past for the people and claims to have a glorious background. She remembers that she used to have a driver and a lot of servants in a big mansion. But after the partition¹ she escaped to Calcutta and left her family behind. Actually no one believes her stories and everybody make fun of her. Dalals who live on the third floor in the building start to gain more money and buy some new stuff for their house. This make a change in the building and everybody desires a modern face for the place they live. At last they fire Boori Ma to hire a real durwan.

Boori Ma is the symbol of the third world women. She has a glorious past but now nobody takes her seriously. At the beginning of the story the reader feels that everybody loves her and feels sympathy towards her. Now and then the residents give her some tea or bread and soup. They "like that Boori Ma ,who slept each night behind the collapsible gate, stood guard between them and the outside world" (73). But gradually, when the slight signs of modernism and technology enter the old building, everything changes.

As Spivak asserts Western feminism possesses a narcissistic tendency when speaking about the third world women. She believes that their study of a third world woman's life is in the favor of Western female subject constitution ("French Feminism" 147). This is the case similar to that of the old building residents and Boori Ma. They sympathize with her and listen to the stories about her past but as soon as they feel that they have a modern building, their look at Boori Ma changes. And at last they fire her.

¹Following negotiations with Hindu and Muslim leaders, the British government announced the new constitutional plan, which called for partition between India and Pakistan. This plan was endorsed by the Muslim League on June 9 and the All-India Congress on June 16" (Stearns 341).

Somewhere in the story when we are given a description about Boori Ma, we read:

In fact, the only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut. It was with this voice that she enumerated, twice a day as she swept the stairwell, the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation on Calcutta after partition. (70)

It is this voice which is important in Spivak's theories. Although by a Western definition of a woman she will look like an oppressed unwaged, domesticated woman, she has a strong voice of her own. Though she always retells memories about her glorious past and the sufferings which made her escape to Calcutta she never seems to be unsatisfied. She takes her job seriously and is living a peace and quiet life.

One day Mr. Dalal of the third floor, which truly symbolizes the third world, who gets a promotion at job, buys two basins for home. He installs one at his home and one in the staircase to impress the visitors and give a modern face to the old building. This is a turning point in the story and this modernization which is the first step of imperialism, changes Boori Ma's life. As soon as the tokens of Western life enter the building everything changes. Technology claims a better and more peaceful life, as the Western feminism does.

When the workmen came to install the sinks in the building, "they made it impossible for Boori Ma to sweep the stairwell that day" (78). Her daily routine life is being interrupted and she is going to lose her job soon. It has been for some weeks that Boori Ma has not been comfortable with her quilts. She thinks some insects live in her quilts. Mrs. Dalal urges her to throw away the quilts and promises her to buy new quilts and sheets for her. However, installing the basins in the building and the upcoming events keeps Mrs. Dalal busy and Boori Ma sleeps on newspaper at nights. She even loses her bed by entering the signs of imperialism to the building.

Boori Ma keeps all her savings in a knot at the free end of her sari. Whenever in a tangling situation, she unconsciously shakes it to hear the rattling sound of the coins and keys there. When Mrs. Dalal suggests that Boori Ma's problem with her quilts might be because of Prickly heat, Boori Ma shakes the free end of her sari.

In the afternoons she unties the end of her sari and counts her life savings. She is homeless, she does not have any family, and the only thing she possesses is this saving. It gives her confidence. She feels safe and secured hearing the rattling sound of the coins and

keys at the bottom of her sari. Despite all of these, one never feels any kind of unhappiness or dissatisfaction in her. This is the difference between western female and the third world female which Spivak speaks about. Spivak believes that there is a more important binary opposition than Man/Woman. She proposes the strategic essentialism which copies the negative representation of all the minority groups such as women. Spivak writes,

What is the consistency of an international feminism? ... The complicity of a few French texts in that attempts could be part both of the problem- the "West" out to "know" the "East" determining a "Westernized Easterner's" symptomatic attempt to know her own world; or of something like a solution-reversing and displacing ... the ironclad opposition of West and East. ("French Feminism" 135)

When Dalals go to vacation, all the wives in the building start planning renovations of their own. So suddenly the building is full of workers doing different stuff. "To avoid the traffic, Boori Ma took to sleeping on the rooftop. So many people passed in and out of the collapsible gate, so many others clogged the alley at all times, that there was no point in keeping track of them" (80). Nobody remembers any more to offer a cup of tea to her. By entering the imperialism to the building with the hope of improvement and a better life, not only Boori Ma gains anything but she loses the smallest happiness she had.

Since she cannot clean the staircases anymore, and she has nothing to do in the building due to the traffic workers have made, she starts taking walks in the neighborhood and local bazaars. It is during one of these walks when she loses all her life savings. When she returns to the building bewildered and sad all the residents are waiting for her. The basin in the stairwell is stolen and everybody blame Boori Ma not to take care of it. And at last they accuse her to accomplice with the thieves. This is obvious that imperialism brings empty hopes to the lives of the third world people.

A third world woman like Boori Ma may seem oppressed in the western feminists' eye. But such definitions merely work for western feminism's own self-elaboration and thus shares similarities with the discourse of imperialism. As Spivak elaborates western feminism's claim of sisterhood with all women around the world cannot be a true one since they never take into account the cultural and social differences.

"The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is about a twenty-nine-year-old woman living in India. She suffers from an old strange ailment for which numerous treatments have been suggested but

none worked for her. She has lost her parents and is living with a cousin and his wife who does not care for her too much. Yet the female neighbors do whatever they can to help her. The twist comes at the end of the story where the lonely Bibi who has been abandoned by her cousin, get pregnant and gives birth to a son and is finally cured.

Bibi, who has lost her mother at birth, used to live with her father who was a math teacher and dedicated her life to cure his daughter's strange disease until he died. He believed "to every problem there is a cure" (166). He kept studying about the disease and writing letters to foreign doctors until his death. The father failed to help her daughter and the strange attacks keep bothering Bibi.

This story's theme is "the plight and anxiety of the female subaltern as it follows the aftermaths of the globalization process in the life of a native Indian woman who is a victim of both destitution and homelessness" (Bahmanpour 48). Bibi is defined as oppressed due to her lack of independence and having a life under the control of her cousin's power. She cannot decide about her life and she has no possession of her own. But the impact of imperialism and globalization is huge and disastrous on her life.

Bibi lives normally and in peace with her disease. But her cousin and his wife, claiming to be caring and attentive to Bibi, make everything worse for her. The same thing is done to the third world women by the western feminism. Spivak believes that one of the weak points of western feminism is its insisting on individualism opposite to sisterhood and friendship (French Feminism 141). While the claimed attention of Bibi's cousin proved to be useless, the sisterhood and friendship of the female neighbors help her a lot. Spivak writes in her essay "French Feminism in an International Frame",

I re-articulated the question: what is the constituency of an international feminism? ... the complicity of a few French texts in that attempt could be part both of the problem – the "West" out to "know" the "East" determining a "westernized Easterner's" symptomatic attempt to "know her own world"; or of something like a solution,- reversing and displacing (if only by juxtaposing "some French texts" and a "certain Calcutta") the ironclad opposition of West and East. (135)

The sisterhood of Bibi's neighbors is surprising and heart-warming. They always take care of her, accompany her for evening walks, and advise her to dress up and put on makeup

and they look for a husband for her. And at last when her cousin abandons her they give her food and drink and help her to manage her life.

Bibi has visited a great number of doctors, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets and has tried different treatments such as allopath, homeopath and ayurvedics; However, none could cure her ailment. The last doctor who visits her is a traditional Indian therapist who believes that a marriage can cure her mysterious disease. The cousin and his wife do not take it seriously and do nothing to find a husband for Bibi. However, Bibi believes that this is the cure she has been waiting for all her life. Like the western feminist's prescription, none of the western sciences can cure her, but the local belief is the real palpable cure for the third world woman such as Bibi.

Bibi has been deprived of all feminine activities at home in fear of messing up the situation due to her disease. House works, cooking and cleaning are banned for her. According to western feminism women should spend their times on works more valuable and useful than house works, but this is the field where Bibi's cure lies.

Eva Figes (1932-2012) was an English feminist and her influential book was *Patriarchal Attitude* (1970). In this book

She challenged the myth that motherhood was totally fulfilling, and criticized both Freudian psychoanalysis and the institution of marriage. She examined the roles played by religion, capitalism and philosophy in the creation of a culture in which a woman is taught to desire 'not what her mother desired for herself but what her father and all men find desirable in a woman'. The process by which female identity is constructed was, she believed, less to do with inherent biological factors than with the external norms, conditions and power relations which promote and support male domination. She argued that the discovery of the male role in reproduction was the catalyst for the subsequent desire throughout history for control over women. (Gamble 32)

Spivak in her study of the story "Breast Giver" (1997) by Mahasweta Devi (1926-) "calls into question that aspect of Marxist feminism which ... from the point of view of mothering as work ignores the mother as subject" (Morton 76). But here in this story we see at the end of the story how curiously Bibi is cured just by bearing a baby and being a mother. The important point in the story is the emphasis on motherhood by totally ignoring the role of

the father. Nobody knows who the father is and even Bibi claims that she does not know him and it must be happened during one of her attacks.

For years afterward, we wondered who in our town had disgraced her. A few of our servants were questioned, and in tea stalls and bus stands, possible suspects were debated and dismissed. But there was no point carrying out an investigation. She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured.
(172)

The life of Bibi Halder challenges the western feminism's claims to bring freedom and happiness for the third world women. Bibi's treatment and cure is pure Eastern and Indian which happens at the end of the story. Lahiri's character clearly and simply elaborates the cultural differences between West and East which demand for totally different treatments and approaches.

"Mrs. Sen's" is about an academic's wife, Mrs. Sen, who looks after Eliot, an eleven-year-old boy, every day after his school. Mrs. Sen who is an Indian immigrant living in America has a lot of dissimilarities with Eliot's mom, an American woman, which Eliot notices lots of times. Mrs. Sen has to confront a new culture which questions her definition of womanhood and her female identity. She tries to reach a conclusion and come to a definition of her identity. However, the more she tries the deeper she fails.

Many times in the story Mrs. Sen remembers and mentions India and Indian Culture. Deep inside, she sees herself as an Indian woman, a third world female, and loves this picture. But the situation she has in the host country and the requirements of the new culture force her to change her definitions and ideas which gets her into a big trouble. The detailed study of the story demonstrates the great difference between the Western and Eastern femininity and the definition of happiness and satisfaction in two cultures.

The initial difference between Mrs. Sen and Eliot's mother is that Eliot's mom has a job but Mrs. Sen is a housewife. In Indian culture as Mrs. Sen remembers repeatedly, most of the women are housewives and they have a system of their own in being housewives. They have established a sisterhood of which Spivak speak,

"Whenever there is a wedding in the family," she told Eliot one day, "or a large celebration of any kind, my mother sends out word in the evening for all the neighborhood women to bring blades just like this one, and then they

sit in an enormous circle on the roof of our building, laughing and gossiping and slicing fifty kilos of vegetables through the night.” (115)

The above paragraph elaborates clearly the sisterhood of Indian Women in contrast with the individual lonely life of Eliot's mother. The self-chosen condition, being house wives, of women in India and how they are happy with their choice is a point that no feminist theorist has ever taken into account. This is the point where the difference between Mrs. Sen-in-India and Mrs. Sen-in-America happen. Moreover, the main theme of her life moves from happiness to loneliness and depression. The interesting point is the subject of sleeplessness in this part of the story. Mrs. Sen asserts that it was impossible to sleep on those nights in India and she also claims that she cannot sleep in so much silence here in America. However, the difference between these two kinds of sleeplessness is the point where Spivak would stress on and build her theory.

These are the cultural and social differences which Spivak believes Western feminism should take into consideration. She believes that the female subaltern has never been heard. So the western feminists do not really know the needs and background of Eastern women. Here is where Spivak speaks about Sati. "By representing Sati as a barbaric practice, the British were thus able to justify imperialism as a civilizing mission" (Morton 63). She believes that nobody tries to listen to the widow herself, nobody cares about her wish and intend and she invites the Western feminists to view the whole story from a new angel.

Reading the story reveals that how Mrs. Sen's home sickness and loneliness are overlooked, unrecognized and lost in the Western individualist and feminist field. Mrs. Sen is longing for home and its Indian culture but she has to learn driving which she keeps postponing. She has to follow the feminist rules of the Western world to be a recognized citizen. Western feminism takes advantage of her non-position, here her disability to drive, and redefines her as the one in need of representation.

One day when Mrs. Sen is putting on the scarlet powder on her forehead Eliot sees her and asks her curiously that what it is for. Ms. Sen answers:

“I must wear the powder every day,” she explained when Eliot asked her what it was for, “for the rest of the days that I am married.”

“Like a wedding ring, you mean?”

“Exactly, Eliot, exactly like a wedding ring. Only with no fear of losing it in the dishwater.” (117)

Eliot understands this cultural difference so easily. The cultural difference in wedding sign which stands for the difference between Western and Eastern culture, demonstrates its simplicity. And Mrs. Sen declares that how much safer the Eastern culture is. These are the points which are missing in Western feminists' studies and comments on Eastern women. She used to have a driver in India, but here according to American life style she has to learn driving which causes her trouble at the end of the story. In one of her practical driving sessions she has an accident with Eliot in her car.

Mrs. Sen's final act of driving alone can also be seen as an attempt to gain independence from the patriarchal presence of her husband on whose help she always depends. Western feminism has taught her to try to gain this independence, and as mentioned in chapter 3 to gain an identity in this society she opens up herself to the western feminist's theory which predictable fails.

As Seen in this research the situation is worse for the female subalterns. The female subalterns are doubly colonized and oppressed in Lahiri's short stories. They are not only fighting to gain an identity in an imperialist society but also struggling as women with different cultures. They are stripped of their femininity in order to be recognized as subjects functioning in the patriarchal neo-colonial nationalist discourse of the dominant.

Spivak maintains that feminism should take the struggles, lives and experience of the third world women into consideration. She believes that they should listen to the third world women and let them speak for themselves. Spivak accuses the Western feminist to be self-obsessed. She questions their claim of sisterhood with Eastern women and accuses them of selfishness.

The Indian female characters of Lahiri's short stories do not support Western feminist's theories. They contradict these theories and show the new rules and needs of the third world women. Bibi Haldar's life is a strong credit for a clear difference between Western and Eastern women's lives and needs. In contrast with the feminist's theories, all of Bibi's ailments and problems are solved through marriage and she starts a happy life afterwards.

This is the same about Boori Ma the cleaner of an old building in India. The story reveals in detail how globalisation and imperialism step by step take away her happiness and even her home at the end. This story is truly a proof of Spivak's critique of Western feminism. It shows that how cultural and social differences make a vast gap between Western and the third world women's needs and lives.

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