



## Thematic Concern: A close look on profoundly similar, Ranighater Britanto and The Treatment of Bibi Haldar

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### Abstract

Literature always serves as one of the best mediums to capture social realities. Creative writers have used their ink to give voice to the voiceless. A reader would not find any apparent similarity between Syed Mustafa Siraj and Jhumpa Lahiri, writing in different space, time, and in different languages. However, beyond such differences, the thread that binds the two artists together is their articulation of age-old tale of victimization of women especially mentally retarded woman in a similar fashion, within Indian society. The present paper seeks to investigate the story, “Ranighater Britanto” written in Bengali and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” penned in English by Jhumpa Lahiri, which despite a huge time gap explore the similarity of women condition in hegemonic construction. The aim of the paper is to capture the thematic similarity of the two stories while comparing and analyzing the mode of narration as well as use of language by the two masters.

Keywords- women, feminism, marginality, rape, oppression.

Literature always serves as one of the best mediums to capture social realities. Creative writers have used their ink to give voice to the voiceless. As concerned individuals, Syed and Jhumpa Lahiri always have spoken in the favor of marginal and the two stories picked for discussion are living example of that. A reader would not find any apparent similarity between Syed Mustafa Siraj and Jhumpa Lahiri, writing in different space, time, and in different languages. However, beyond such differences, the thread that binds the two artists together is their articulation of age-old tale of victimization of women especially mentally retarded women in a similar fashion, within Indian society. Syed Mustafa Siraj is one of the prolific writers of Bengal. Born in the year 1930, Syed has three hundred short stories and one fifty novels in his credit. For his commendable contribution, he has received a number of awards, including Sahitya Akademi award in the year 1994, followed by Bankim Puruskar and Anondo Puraskar. Though he is one of the prominent writers of Bengali origin, however, a very few writings of his is known to the outside world. Until now, only a few of his short stories and one novel is available in English, rest waiting to discover and to be translated. On the other hand, Jhumpa Lahiri is quite a new figure in the international literary scene with only two short story collections, two novels and

two non-fictional works in her kitty. However, in a very short period of time, she has registered her name as one of the most promising writers of American- Bengali origin with Pulitzer to her credit.

The story, “Ranighater Britanto” written in Bengali and “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” penned in English by Jhumpa Lahiri, despite a huge time gap explore the similarity of women condition in hegemonic construction. The two short fictions are written on two mentally disabled women impregnated by unknown abusers arousing the sympathy as well as suspicion of the neighbor, executed in a similar manner, strengthens the comparison. Both of the writers effectively capture the vulnerability of women seen as only objects, and glorification of motherhood within patriarchy without fail, arousing reader’s sympathy as well as concern.

Turned into film recently, Syed Mustafa Siraj’s Bengali short story, “Ranighater Britanto” speaks for the age-old dilemma of being a woman in Indian society which seems to ever stagnant and indifferent towards women’s plight. In a viewpoint of a detached omniscient narrator, Syed in a light sarcastic tone aptly captures the timeless theme of injustice meted to marginal groups. A rough sketch of the story of Syed would be that two officers have come to Ranighat to document names and other population regarding details. They discover Surikhapi the mentally retard woman pregnant. An elderly woman gets enraged by the revelation and mutters cursing words. Everyone in Ranighat suspects each other. Further, everyone tries their best to find the culprit who has brought such disgrace. However, failing to find the rapist, people dismiss the issue. The officers just wash their hands in one line saying that people are still animals. While Surikhapi carries the baby successfully for nine months, People of Ranighat show their mercy upon Surikhapi by building a shelter for her and her child. The elderly woman takes care of her daily needs, helps her in delivering the baby and teaching her surviving skills. Later someone brings sindoor and conch bangles to give her marital status. Soon Surikhapi’s situation improved, from Surikhapi, she becomes Khapi ma. Surikhapi loudly utters only single word, babara, babara, and god fearing people of Ranighat throw pennies before her which helped her to survive. After a few years when Surikhapi dies, people of Ranighat took care of her boy, Faltu who later turns into a bus conductor. We see Syed stretching the story bit far as Faltu later fell in love with a girl from Ranighat who kill herself knowing that her father had impregnated Surikhapi. Hence, Faltu was her half-brother by relation. However, later the story reveals that Surikhapi was raped by two people. The truth makes Faltu absurd and he became indifferent to life. To take revenge from life, he continued to take sadistic pleasure by crashing earth under his bus’s tires.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s repeats the same theme in 1999 and does not fail to retail the story convincingly. However, this time from the very mouth of the protagonist which makes the retailing more appealing. Bibi too suffers from an unknown brain disease which is beyond the understanding of medical science. Left alone to her fate she lives at the mercy of her immediate neighbors. Bibi Haldar though had a father who tried

every possible way to comprehend the reason for her illness but unfortunately could not. Aggravating her tragedy her father dies soon and she is left with her distant cousin brother's family who abandons her eventually. Here apart from translating a tragic tale of a mentally unstable woman, the writer also focuses her lens on how women come down as a community to help the helpless. By feeding, delivering the baby and helping her in establishing a small business.

Unlike Bibi, the family background of Surikhepi is unknown which further complicates her state. Her family, caste, religion, the reason of insanity remains mysterious to the people of Ranighat. The only known reality is that she is been living in Ranighat for the past seven years. She cannot even speak like normal humans and only utters words, Ogo Babara, Babara. Here, both of them are thrice marginalized as women, unemployed as well as being mentally unstable. Having no stable home, they become easy to accessible victims of male lust. However, the women carry their babies to the full term and deliver two healthy male babies. Being mentally retarded the whole incident of sexual abuse instead of putting them in trauma, turns into boons which bring means of income and some kind of relief in their aimless abused existence. While Surikhapi remains the same after becoming a mother, a significant rather drastic change comes in Bibi's behavior. Bibi started a small business with the help of her neighboring women who unify as a whole community to make her a self-sufficient mother.

Since time immemorial glorifying motherhood is being part of Indian culture. The motherhood which works as an agency to keep women in the altar of Goddesses is one of the biggest schemes of patriarchal oppression. Both the stories lay bears the biggest reality of Indian lives where the society is indifferent towards any crime against women who are truly voiceless. People instead of searching the culprits who are the intruder of one's personal space, somehow cover up the whole issue by shifting the focus on helping the women deliver their child and feel guilt-free by providing little bit support to the victims inform of providing the basic amenities of survival. Jhumpa too ends her story by lodging a drastic change in the behavior of Bibi who miraculously gets cured after becoming a mother.

Feminism as a movement started to uplift women's state all over the world. It is a realization of women as a whole community that they are marginal beings and they must stand altogether to protect their rights. It is an effort to challenge the dominant structure to include women in the mainstream life. One of the various themes portrayed in the present stories is, the evidence of women unifying as a community to help Bibi and Khepi, which reflect the power of women to act as a group to help each other, to assert identity. Even in the case of Bibi, the women ganged up against Bibi's cousin who ill-treated her and forced to shut down his business.

The second wave of feminism had brought out the issues like one's right over one's body, social security of women, access to abortion, contraceptive pills and more importantly rigorous rules of punishment for any kind of sexual abuse. However, even

in the twenty-first century, women are still struggling with the same issues. And in the case of third world women situations is getting worst day by day. A recent study reveals that India is one of the most unsafe countries for women. Standing in such circumstance, where every day some women get raped, sometimes by one or sometimes by multiple people; the whole idea of discussing the present stories become more significant as it highlights the timelessness as well the seriousness of the subject.

Simon de Beauvoir in her seminal text, “Second Sex”, points out the issue that motherhood works as an agency which is most suppressing. However, the very notion of radical feminists that motherhood is the biggest drawback for women in realizing their dreams, which turns women into a mere baby producing machine, simply a body has been challenged in time and again. Gayatri Spivak, in her translated story “Breast Giver” shows how motherhood helped a woman in becoming a bread earner of the family. The two stories of present discourse also somehow establish the same fact. We see both the women’s life significantly improve after their pregnancy where one almost gets cured and another being reached to the status of Devi by chance. Though, in normal circumstance both the women would have become a symbol of shame and would have been systematically boycotted from the mainstream society being violating social norms. Yet in reality in these stories, the whole community gathers to help them, even celebrates the birth of the illicit babies and arranges in finding livelihood for them.

Language is an integral part of any narration and it’s important to focus on the stories keeping the language and way of execution of a tale in mind. Lahiri in one of her interviews writes about the character Bibi as taken from real life; Lahiri had an encounter with her during her stays in India. She writes that the woman was a misfit, living in Calcutta. She was an epileptic who had very little awareness of her mental state and wished to lead a normal life. In the story, she deals with Indian society’s involvement in her life to make sure her life could become a little better. Lahiri, unlike Syed, gives voice to the woman, desperate to get married, lamenting for not having anyone to arrange her marriage. In Lahiri’s narration, the struggle of the helpless woman touches the heart and subtly brings out the hypocrisy of Indian society with light irony. Here Lahiri takes advantage as a woman and having a real encounter with such a woman. So Lahiri easily gets into the psyche of the woman and successfully brings out her struggle. Hence, she is more intimate. Here come the limitations of Syed as a man; he cannot assume her voice, cannot capture the intricate rise and fall of a crazy woman’s emotions. His narration is more of a detached omniscient narrator’s. Hence, instead of voicing the agony of Surikhepi, he gives consciousness to her boy faltu, who remind much in focus at the end. However, in case of language Syed takes advantage as a local of Bengal managing to ink the nuances of Bengali language with great precision. Lahiri here lacks as an outsider of the culture as well as the language. Despite some minor differences, things are very alike in their stories. The physical structure of the two women, their struggle, rape,

pregnancy, male child and how they always stay at the periphery of their society. Women of their neighbor though come down in helping them in their needs but they know Bibi or Khepi is not their burden. Their living space is always outside of anyone's private domain. Surikhepi's son too has no place within the dominant structure as he is named Faltu (useless), an illicit child.

The two writer differ at the ending as an American woman, Jhumpa transforms Bibi into a confident mother whose sudden changed is quite surprising rather difficult to take. Syed, on the other hand, could not offer any magic cure to Khepi, who dies a tragic yet convincible death. Despite the contrast, we can say both the story become one when the writers point out the atrocity of Indian male-dominated society where women always feel unsafe. Both the story is at once become more significant as it focuses on the heinous mentality of men who do not even leave mentally retard women to satisfy their need of sexual pleasure. It also depicts how easily such crimes go unreported, strengthening the evil motive of such criminals. The people in the stories raise eyebrows regarding the rape. But nobody bothers to inform police or to lodge any complaint. They came down as a unified force to make sure the women survive. Syed goes one step further in showing how a mentally retired woman suddenly turns into a Devi in a god fearing country as someone puts sindoor on Khepi's head. And most importantly, the main puzzle remains an unsolved mystery; who has taken advantage of two women? Who has intruded in their private space without consent? Though the stories are written in a different language and in different time zone, yet the origin and the background in which the stories are placed makes the comparative riveting. The writers have no immediate connection as one writes long before the other and Lahiri has very little access to the Bengali language.

Before winding up, it can be said that in today's Indian society the issue of rape has become a daily part of women's living as well as her destiny. There is a tendency to stereotype the issue as only an expression of gratification of animalistic need. However, no one enters deep down in the psyche of a rapist. In the very core of the subject remains the patriarchy which does not want to hear no from a woman. As Beauvoir mentions, "meaning that the male sees her essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so she is it in the absolute." (Beauviour 26). Moreover, the very idea of one's right over one's body is still unacceptable to masculinity. Rape is only an umbrella term under which lies myriad factors like illiteracy, hunger for power, mental absurdity, history of sexual abuse, desire to dominate, even to avenge honor etc. Hence, the reality is not that simple. Apart from that the ever-growing disparity of wealth and lack of education play crucial factors. Though, the recent government is trying its best to ensure the safety of women by bringing rules of rigorous punishment. However, nothing has improved, as one can see recent data which proves from a newborn baby to an eighty years old woman, no one is spare. In such a context the present stories become more relevant as they reveal the history of the marginal state of woman; in addition, it throws a question that where the government has failed

to ensure safety to normal women in India, where do mentally retard women and minor girls stand?

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