

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 5, May 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

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### A Psychoanalytic Study of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*

#### Abstract

This research paper concentrates on the study of surface human psyche which outwardly appears as a result of several hidden desires of unconscious in literary works. Psychological Problems like hysteria take on humans under the influence of some past repressed tragic memories or desires which ultimately are reflected through the behaviour of a person. Fulfilment of these desires act as purgation and cure for diseased mind as it happens with an important character of the selected story.

Keywords: Hysteria, Marriage, Husband, Hidden desires

Psychoanalytic criticism tries to investigate the mysteries and secret desires or fears of the people or characters in art and literature because buried side of human personality has always been a riddle ever since its origin. Psychoanalytic critics actually apply some techniques which actually were found by Australian psychologist Sigmund Freud with a purpose to cure the patients of neurosis and other psychological problems. "Psychoanalysis itself is a form of therapy which aims to cure mental disorders by 'investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the mind'" (Barry 96).

Psychoanalytic readings put more emphasis on sexuality that is why psycho analysis and its criticism is highly debatable and controversial topic. "Of all the critical approaches to literature, this has been one of the most controversial, the most abused and least appreciated." (Guerin 125) Freud talks about the notion of "unconscious" which build the foundation of this theory. Hidden desires anxieties and wishes are covered deep in the unconscious and the process is called "Repression". But the repressed does not remain repressed forever. It returns and takes the form of dreams where the conscious ego cannot handle it and gratification is permitted. Sometimes the repressed also appears in the work of arts unconsciously. Unacceptable hidden desires and sexuality are considered to be the key features of Psychoanalytic criticism. In art forms these repressed desires can be sought with a keen analysis of symbolic representations of these desires. Such symbolic representations can be located in the form of "displacement" where the actual object is represented by another.

Another important theory of psychoanalysis, Hysteria actually evolved from Freud's work with patient Bertha Pappenheim, famously known as Anna O, a teenager girl suffering from various mental symptoms including hallucination, amnesia and partial paralysis. Freud worked together with a colleague, Dr. Joseph Breuer on the case. Both Freud and Breuer believed that hysteria in a woman had meaning and that this meaning could be brought out by encouraging the patient to express her feelings and experiences, repressed or otherwise. Freud explains these hidden meanings and symbols in dreams as "Dream work". Freud soon got separated from Breuer due to some difference in ideas and methods. He later worked separately and referred to his ideas and methods as Psychoanalysis.

Throughout the ages, writers have strived to explore the complexities of human mind through literature. Many plays and stories have traced the development of psychological behaviour with clinical accuracy. Jhumpa Lahiri's, *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of nine stories, has won Pulitzer Prize for Fiction 2000. *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar* is a very

touchy story from the collection which narrates the plight of Bibi Haldar who suffers from a baffling disease which made her family members, exasperated, and ultimately she is left alone to suffer. Lahiri presents a different picture of sex different from its two objectives of pleasure and procreation. Through the portrayal of a hysterical character, apart from highlighting the atrocious attitude of Indian society, Lahiri seems to emphasize the role of suppressed sexual desire in the healing of physical deformity and mental retardation.

Bibi Haldar was staying with her brother in a flat in Calcutta. She is given a storage room on the roof, a space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine, curtained entrance, one window without a grill, and shelves made from the panels of the old doors (Lahiri, 159).

She used to record inventory for the cosmetics shop that her cousin Haldar owned and managed at the mouth of the courtyard. For her work she was given food, shelter and “sufficient metres of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe and act as an inexpensive tailor” (Lahiri, 159). Her only obsession in life was to get a husband. Every day she expected a man to come and offer his hand to her. It never materialized. She loved to hear from other women the details of their marriage. She would sigh after seeing their marriage albums. After devouring the details from other women, she would say, “when it happens to me, you will all be present” (Lahiri, 160). After futile waiting, she would say, “My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste, who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card” (Lahiri, 160-161).

A Repressed desire of sexual desire becomes part of her unconscious mind which brings forward an abnormal behaviour and tries to seek gratification which is not permissible under societal rules. Although a long period of suffering, humiliation and indifferent attitude of the relatives has emaciated Bibi Haldar physically and mentally, the fire of hidden sexuality burns as intensely in her as in any normal human being” Each day she (Bibi)

unloaded her countless privations upon us, until it became unendurably apparent that Bibi wanted a man” (Lahiri, 160). Bibi herself admits,

Who takes me to the cinema, the zoo garden, buys me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns of mine? I will never be cured, never married (Lahiri, 161).

This shows that her cure is related to her marriage, or vice-versa, which is also claimed by her doctor “a marriage would cure her (Lahiri, 161). Mr. and Mrs. Haldar never cared to give a thought to this, although Mr. Haldar gave an advertisement after being pestered by the inmates of the flat. Consequently, the neighbourhood takes great pains to transform her into a perfect lady and find her a suitable match, which, however, does not materialize. The failure of getting a husband further deteriorates Bibi’s condition who is eventually forsaken by her relatives after the death of their newly-born child, thought to be the impact of Bibi’s illness, and is forced to live an abject life of misery on the top of the roof at the mercy of the flat holders. At last Mr. Haldar winded up his cosmetics shop and left the place with his wife and the daughter. Bibi was left alone with Rs.300 that Mr. Haldar gave her. But the story takes a new turn when the inmates discover, after Mr. and Mrs. Haldar’s departure, that Bibi Haldar was pregnant. The search for the real culprit ended in futility. However, this stigma turns out to be a blessing as it cures Bibi and enables her to live a normal life with her fatherless child. She delivers a male child and takes care of the child. The story ended with these words, “she was to the best of her knowledge cured” (Lahiri, 172).

In this story Lahiri has explored a character’s psychological state which provides reader with a greater understanding of the workings of human psyche. Deprivation of fulfilment of certain desires makes misfits of some people. Sexual liberation of suppressed desires cures Bibi Haldar of a mysterious disease in spite of being deprived of marriage. The very name of Bibi is symbolic and can be translated as ‘wife’, she has been a wife without

marriage, and so she can have a man but not a husband, an attribute granted by marriage. The narrator herself comments that Bibi wants a man (Lahiri, 160); this desire for a man in the case of Bibi is the iteration that, despite being a disabled, she is a natural woman and hence needs a natural man free from any social bindings who can gratify her sexual desire; the desire which is whetted by her lasting hysteria. It is said that for a patient of hysteria, sexual intercourse is a panacea, and so it seems in the case of Bibi. To speak in other words, sex in this story is used as purgation and sex as social stigma again raise the conflict between sex and culture, and they need to be distanced if the former is meant to be used clinically. We cannot apply traditional moral values in our assessment of the sexuality of Bibi Haldar, and yet, we cannot throw away the question of the legitimacy of her child. This complicates any pursuit of distancing sex from culture.

The purgation of Bibi Haldar can well be correlated with Kubuja of *The Mahabharata*. Like Bibi, Kubuja also suffers humiliation and indifference of people due to her physical deformity till she is cured by the touch of Lord Krishna. The metamorphosis of Kubuja into a fairy damsel is like Bibi's transformation into a normal lady. In both the cases touch plays a significant role; one is a divine touch while the other is a phallic touch both aim to salvage the recipient from their respective maladies. This glorifies the status of sex and raises it from its constrictive image of taboo and base instinct.

Psychoanalysis theories may seem highly far-fetched to many people for social reason too. However, it is an undeniable truth that this genre of interpretation has produced a tremendous impact on world literature. Many important literary works have also been effectively deciphered through psychoanalytic theory. The crucial point is to apply the relevant psychoanalytic idea or concept to the appropriate literary work. If this is done, then new meaning such as never been understood from other tools of criticism may be unveiled. After all, psychoanalytic approach takes its birth from complexities of the human life which

affects the psyche of humans and literature is nothing but a reflection of life. Psychoanalytic reading has been in practice from the early development of Psychoanalysis itself and has now developed into a rich and heterogeneous interpretive approach.

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