

# Altruism in Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Real Durwan"

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### Abstract

*Altruism is an important aspect in Positive psychology, defined as helping others and showing concern for the well-being of others without expecting any reward, the person extend help voluntarily, slowly becoming his/her habit. Person with altruism feels empathetic at others, spend time with them, listen to them and try to be emotionally connected with them. Jhumpa Lahiri's Interpreter of Maladies is her first book, it interprets the problems faced by the experience of diasporans such as displacement, rootlessness, disintegration, discrimination, marginalization and crisis in identity. A Real Durwan is the story about Boori Ma, a sweeper migrated to India from Pakistan because of political reasons.*

**Keywords:** Altruism, Empathy, Helping Behaviour, Benevolence.

Born as Nilanjana Sudheshna to Bengali parents in London, she was called by her nick name Jhumpa from her childhood both in her family and in her school. She is a successful teacher a writer. Rooted strongly with the Bengalian concept from her parental feeding, she feels comfortable in Italian way of life and feels alienated with the American culture. Her works speaks about the Bengali family, their culture, traditional way of dressing in a foreign land. Identity crisis, multiculturalism, Acculturation, diasporic elements are the themes discussed by Lahiri in her works. She won Pulitzer Prize (2000) for her debut short story collection, "Interpreter of Maladies" published in the year 1999. Later she has published her novel 'Namesake', which was made into movie later by Mira Nair, Jhumpa did a cameo role in the movie. Her second short collection is named as "Unaccustomed Earth", comprising of different characters and their life. Lahiri's new novel is titled Whereabouts, an English translation of her first Italian novel.

"Altruism is behavior motivated by concern for others or by internalized values, goals, and self-rewards rather than by the expectation of concrete or social rewards, or the desire to avoid punishment or sanctions"—Eisenberg et al. (1999). [5]

Benevolence, morally valuable character trait—or virtue—of being disposed to act to benefit others, later modified with the term 'Altruism'. The term 'altruism' was introduced by Auguste Comte to describe devotion to the interests of others as an action-guiding principle [2].

The concept of altruism was entirely different from Charles Darwin's theory of the evolution of man and natural selection and survival of the fittest. When people make their journey in the path of selfishness, few are selfless in nature and they travel with many to make their life better. Early Psychological theories based on Psychoanalysis put forth the importance selfishness, egoism and self-love. Human beings still love to lead a hedonic life, seeking pleasure and to avoid pain.

Positive theories and theorists insist the importance of Empathy. Empathy involves feelings of sympathy and a desire to relieve another's suffering [3]. Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel, see things from their point of view, and imagine yourself in their place. Essentially, it is putting yourself in someone else's position and feeling what they are feeling. [4] Empathy in simple words, "putting yourself in other's shoes". Human beings cannot be empathetic all, at all time. Empathy is a feeling which changes according to our environment and mind-set, on the contrary, Altruism is innate and will be exhibited naturally devoid of other people's behaviour.

Boori Ma, a sweeper of stairwell in an apartment works selflessly and served as a watch guard to the people over there. She resided near the stairs and as the story starts, we understand that she experienced sleepless nights because of the mites. On her work, either sweeping or washing, she spoke great about her elite past, the exquisite cuisine served on her daughter's wedding. The kids disbelieved and made fun of her, still she continued to say about her past. Once Mr. Chatterjee remarked, "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes" (pg. no 72). She restricted herself from entering into the houses except for Mrs. Dalal's. Seeing the poor status of Boori Ma she offered to get her a new bed to experience a sound and peaceful sleep. Without any expectation she worked there. One day Mr. Dalal brings a new wash basin for his house and placed another for a common use which he buys after receiving promotion in his job. After this they left for a happy trip. The other residents felt jealous on Dalal's and they unanimously decided to renovate their houses. With the coming of many workers to the apartment Boori Ma shifted her shelter to the terrace. One day when she left for market, the

other residents discovered that the communal wash basin was missing and Boori Ma became the scapegoat. Though she tried to prove her innocence they scantily listened and threw her out of the apartment.

Boori Ma, an innocent woman who is altruistic in nature is not recognised and respected by the selfish residents. After forcing her to move out of their place Boori Ma resisted and pleaded them to allow her inside, yet they were not moved. Throughout the story we learn that Boori Ma lived a selfless life.

The partition of the country in 1947 generated a mass movement of Hindus and Muslims from India to Pakistan and vice versa leaving an ineffaceable scar in the mind of Indians, especially in Punjabi-Bengalis who were affected at the worse, as they were the direct victims. Boori Ma means "big mother" in Bengali, typically this kind of name is given to an old female servant in South Asia. Considered as a victim of partition by others, she is given a place by the Bengali people in the apartment to keep her belongings and sleep for the night under the letter box. Gratitude is the feeling for those who have made effort for our excellence, but the apartment dwellers exploited the good nature of the old lady, they exhibited their wilder side by suspecting her to be the reason for the robbery in their place. A Real Durwan is the story about Boori Ma, a sweeper who migrated to India from Pakistan not only for financial reasons but also for political reasons. The Persian word, "Durwan" means a person whose duty is to guard the entrance of the durbar (court) of the king, now it's used to refer to the guard at the hotel or a big building.

Boori Ma is altruistic by nature, far away from pseudo-altruism (selfishly motive). Being altruistic in nature, she endlessly rendered her service for the apartment dwellers. She expected nothing from them yet her real character is tested and her loyalty is shattered when they throw her forcefully out of their apartment. Towards the end, Mr. Chatterjee says: "What a building like this needs is a real durwan." (pg. no. 82) This is the paradoxical statement uttered by one of the apartment dwellers who didn't realise that Boori Ma was an unofficially appointed Durwan.

"So the residents tossed her bucket and rags, her basket and reed broom, down the stairwell, past the letter boxes, through the collapsible gate, and into

the alley. Then they tossed out Boori Ma. All were eager to begin their search for a real durwan.” (pg. no. 82)

### Conclusion

This paper aims at creating an insight about human values; that it should be cherished and not to be taken for granted. The analysis clearly states how people exploit good natured people and go to the extent of punishing the innocent person with a mind of service. The reality is horrifying as the apartment dwellers never give a second thought before judging the well-known person. The scope for humanity is questioned, still Boori Ma remains the same and presumes that the residents will take her back, so she waits near the gate with expectation. Boori Ma is an identity of people with whom we live every day, their service to us is humongous, still we delineate by assessing them with their job. As a human being it is important to realise that each and every one around us are ‘humans’ and show humanity to them.

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