

A real Durwan

Plot Summary-

A Real Durwan tells the tale of a 64 year old live in doorkeeper who trudges up and down the stairs keeping them clean with her reed broom that never leaves her side and telling stories about her past with the same phrase at the end of each, "believe me, don't believe me". Boori Ma tells stories of her life of luxuries before she was separated from her husband and kids and made a refugee. Her contradicting stories change every time she tells them, from bullock cart to truck her border crossing is a questionable story at best. Every resident of the building had an alternate interpretation of her stories. Mr. Dalal of the third floor can't comprehend how a landowner winds up clearing stairs, wives think she is the casualty of evolving times, Mr. Chatterjee accepts she essentially grieves her family and wraps herself in dream. All things considered, her stories hurt nobody and she was entertaining. Boori Ma experiences restless nights, Mrs. Dalal, who has a soft spot for Boori Ma, goes to the roof to dry lemon peels. Boori Ma asks her to inspect her back for the bug bites she thinks torment her in her sleep. Mrs. Dalal discovers nothing. Boori Ma speaks again about her lost luxuries, such comforts Mrs. Dalal can't long for. Mrs. Dalal offers Boori Ma some new bedding commercial sheets so she won't experience the ill effects of prickly heat which Boori Ma guarantees her isn't the issue. Later rains transform Boori Ma's bedding into yogurt, so she concentrates on the offer of new bedding. Boori Ma later visits the Dalal's apartment when Mr. Dalal brings home a new basin however Mrs. Dalal is not impressed, as she still does not have a phone or a fridge. This leads to a massive argument heard all throughout the apartment. Boori Ma does not ask about the bedding, and she sleeps on newspaper that night. Mr. Dalal installs one basin in his home and another in the hallway of the building for the neighbours to use, this causes a shadow of resentment among other residents of the building. This resentment leads to mass renovations of the building, with the halls full of workers Boori Ma finds it impossible to sweep the stairs and retreats to the roof. Eventually Boori Ma gets restless up on the roof and decides to wander around the town for a bit, the next day she goes further and the day after even further. One day her skeleton keys and life savings are stolen from the hood of her sari, when she returns to the building she finds the basin has been stolen too. The residents carry her up to the roof and accuse her of telling robbers about the new basin. She tries to convince them, but after all of her lies, they say, how can they believe her now? The residents seek the advice of Mr. Chatterjee. He comes to the conclusion that the building needs a real durwan to keep their valuables safe. They toss Boori Ma out of on the street muttering, as her figure recedes, "believe me, don't believe me."

Character description

Boori Ma:

Boori Ma is a 64 year-old who lives on the roof of the Calcutta building, she is a stair sweeper, or durwan of this building and she also tells stories to residents of the same building of her past, the riches she beheld, her servants and her estate. Boori Ma details her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition in these stories. Boori Ma is an example of those displaced by Partition and her difficulty highlights the problems created after these events. The residents accuse Boori Ma of informing the robbers in negligence for her job. When Boori Ma protests, the residents continue to accuse her because of all her former unreliable stories. The story ends with all of her belongings being thrown out and the search for 'A Real Durwan'.

Mr Dalal:

Mr Dalal is a plumbing salesman who lives with his disgruntled wife in the building that Boori Ma works in. He does what he can for his wife's happiness often buying her gifts and even going on vacations. When he is promoted at his job he gives back what he can to his community by installing a new sink in the stairway of his building. His aspiration of renovation spread throughout the building complex and many others start putting in new basins and renovating what they have.

Mrs Dalal:

Mrs Dalal a generally kindhearted woman who leads a dissatisfied life, although she has a soft spot for Boori as she is very kind to her offering to buy her a new set of bedding and giving her food when she can. Mrs Dalal makes a big impact on Boori's life through this kindness but the same cannot be said for Mrs Dalal as she does not see Boori as a vital part yet she understands her struggles in life.

Mr Chatterjee

Mr. Chatterjee an old and wise resident of the building, his word to other residents has the greatest impact on their decisions as his recommendation to throw Boori Ma is recognised and it is carried out.

Key themes

Status and Possession-

Status is perhaps the most obvious theme in this story, and is prevalent throughout the others in the collection also. The status of the residents in the building is low at the beginning of the story, 'it was a very old building,' and 'no one in this particular flat building owned much worth stealing,' but as the face of the building begins to change, the residents believe their status has risen. Boori Ma has a very low status in the community and is the charity case of the flat building, because of her deportation to Calcutta after partition, and her favourite hobby is to chronicle her previous times of affluence and luxury. The residents are kind to Boori Ma because her services had come to 'resemble those of a real durwan.' Following the installation of the Dalal's new basin, the residents become very jealous of the Dalals as they have become the tip of the hierarchy within the building, and 'as soon as the Dalals were gone, the other wives began planning renovations of their own.' This is a comment on how humans and the characters in this story are desperate to improve their status and feel of value. As the renovations progress and the atmosphere of the building improves, Boori Ma feels out of place and unwelcome, as her status has stayed consistent, and she becomes a reminder to the residents that they are still a lower class community, so that when she fails to protect the building they throw her out, so that they can believe their status has truly changed, and begin their search for 'a real durwan'.

Partition

The basis for Boori Ma's story stems from her deportation to Calcutta after Partition. The partition of India was the Partition of the British Indian Empire, dividing the Bengal province of British India into East Pakistan and West Bengal (India). Many Hindus fled from East Pakistan to India and Muslims from India to Pakistan, seeking safety with a religious majority. Violence broke out on both sides as the respective governments were not equipped to deal with the massive numbers of refugees they received, leading to much displacement. Boori Ma is an example of one of these refugees to Calcutta and this story personalises Partition by allowing the reader to consider an individual, rather than a statistic. This idea as well as the relevance of Bengali suffering in America is explored further in 'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine'.

Stories, gossip, lies and rumours-

Another key theme in this story is that of gossip, stories, lies and rumours, evident in the stories that Boori Ma herself tells, the rumours that circulate about her true past, the gossip between the other wives about the Dalals once they start to rise in status, and how Boori Ma's pleas insisting she did not inform the robbers at the end of the story are dismissed by the residents as lies on the basis that her previous stories were not proven to be true. While Boori details the extravagance of her former life and insists, 'believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you can not even dream them', the residents consider that she 'probably constructs tales as a way of mourning the loss of her family,' or theorise that she had 'once worked as hired help for a prosperous zamindar', however, agree she is a superb entertainer and enjoy her tales that distract them from their dull lives. Once things begin to change in the building, the residents turn on their own out of jealousy and resentment, and 'rumours began spreading that, following their argument, Mr. Dalal had consoled his wife by buying her two kilos of mustard oil... that Mrs. Dalal did nothing but wash her hands in her basin all day.' The residents concoct this gossip as a way of consoling themselves and distracting them from the true hardships at hand, and listen to Boori Ma's stories before turning on her and using them as supposed proof of her disloyalty.

Passage analysis

"Whether there was any truth to Boori Ma's litanies no one could be sure. For one thing, every day, the perimeters of her former estate seemed to double, as did the contents of her almari and coffer boxes. No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear. Still, the residents of this particular flat-building could not reconcile Boori Ma's claims to prior wealth alongside the more likely account of how she had crossed the East Bengal border, with the thousands of others, on the back of a truck, between sacks of hemp. And yet there were days when Boori Ma insisted that she had come to Calcutta on a bullock cart."

Even though Boori Ma never told a story the same twice people still didn't brush off what she would say. Everyone had their own versions and views of Boori Ma's stories and what they believe and what they don't. Because of this the people of the building only trusted one thing about her, she wasn't from Calcutta, she was a refugee.

"The residents were waiting for Boori Ma when she returned that afternoon at the collapsible gate. Baleful cries rang up and down the stairwell, all echoing the same news: the basin on the stairwell had been stolen. There was a big hole in the recently whitewashed wall, and a tangle of rubber tubes and pipes was sticking out of it. Chunks of plaster littered the landing. Boori Ma gripped her reed broom and said nothing. In their haste the residents practically carried Boori Ma up the stairs to the roof, where they planted her on one side of the clothesline and started screaming at her from the other."

In the end when everything is slipping out from under Boori Ma, stories make their way around the building and she becomes the subject of other peoples stories. The building people told her, "for years we have had to put up with your lies." Referring to her stories. In the end she stood separated from the building people because she was never at the same level as them.

Quote explanation

"Boori Ma, sweeper of the stairwell" (p.70).

Considering this description of Boori Ma is given at the beginning of the story, it's given more credibility. Similarly to other stories, they all start with an important quote. The point Jhumpa Lahiri is getting across is that Boori Ma realistically is just the sweeper of the stairwell. All other titles she's given are only the changing perceptions of the people who live with her.

"So she garbled facts. She contradicted herself. She embellished almost everything. But her rants were so persuasive, her fretting so vivid, that it was not so easy to dismiss her" (p.72).

Although Boori Ma's stories were hard to believe, her conviction and people wanting to be entertained overcame the questionable reality of her stories. The only time they begin to dismiss her stories is when they experience the loss she vividly describes in her stories.

"Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes, but she is a victim of changing times" (p.72).

Mr Chatterjee's quote depicts Boori as a victim. He pities her. This idea is revisited when he said "A sure sign of changing times" (p.79). His pity can be based around the idea that they all know Boori Ma as a refugee ("No one doubted she was a refugee" (p.72)). She serves her purpose as an entertainer but wouldn't be worth a second thought when someone is needed to blame.

"Boori Ma stood between them and the outside world" (p.73).

Because Boori Ma's stories transported them to another world, she gave them a sense of security, a clean environment, she was the only reason they had such a well running community in the apartments. At first, most of the apartments tenants would agree "Boori Ma's services came to resemble those of a real Durwan" (p.73).

"Boori Ma preferred to think that what irritated her bed, what stole her sleep, what burned like peppers across her thinning scalp and skin was less of a mundane origin" (p.75).

Although Boori had come to live in such a poor, uncomfortable world, she is a woman who lives in her memories. This is why she hates to think that something so common could cause her so much distress. It, to her disliking grounds her.

"She picked up her broom - she never felt quite herself without it" (p.77).

This is an accurate description of Boori Ma. She loves to keep what she has with her at all times. She makes her possessions apart of her.

"Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes, but that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What this building needs is a real Durwan" (p.78). With the changing times comes changing perceptions. What they used to consider a durwan is no longer good enough. Boori Ma is the victim of the residence changing to a materialistic world. Where every thing is either there for looks or practicality. For the people like Boori Ma, she gets left behind.

"she felt something tugging on the free end of her Sari. When she looked, she saw her life savings and skeleton keys gone" (p.81).

For Boori Ma, a person who lives with all she has with her, who attaches herself to them and lives in the past, losing her possessions is like losing a grip on her past and tumbling down to reality.

"Boori Ma has endangered the security of this building, we have valuables" (p.82).

Once the residence start being more materialistic, they become more shallow and less realistic. the world seems to be judged by what you have. Due to their possessions being stolen, they take the easiest person to blame and kick her out. The refugee Boori Ma stole what we have.

Links to other stories in the collection

'A Real Durwan' links to many if not all of the other stories in Lahiri's collection but perhaps most directly to...

'When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine', through the theme of partition, and the losses suffered by those displaced.

'The Treatment of Bibi Haldar', through the mutual setting in Calcutta, and the story following a disadvantaged woman who is an outcast in her community and eventually mistreated. The theme of gossip is also prevalent in this story, with the wives constantly theorising about Bibi's condition, just as the residents theorise about Boori's past.

'Mrs. Sen's', which again follows a woman who has become separate from the society she lives in, and could, like Boori, be called 'a victim of changing times' as she finds it hard to deal with industrialisation and struggles to learn to drive.