

## An Application of William Labov's Narrative Structure in Jhumpa Lahiri's "A Real Durwan"

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### Abstract

Born in a Bengali family, Jhumpa Lahiri grew up as an immigrant in America. She is a Pulitzer Prize winner for her debut short story collection "Interpreter of Maladies". Her works give worldwide recognition to her literary career. As an immigrant in the foreign country, she reflected all the experiences in her collections. As a popular storyteller, she uses dynamic themes in her narratives like love, marriage, relationship gap, alienation, self-identity, gender issues, etc. Storytelling is a kind of art discussed in Narratology. Narratology, a study of narratives includes the structures, strands, forms, etc. Lahiri in her works used various structures and forms in order to differ herself from the other writers. The present study focuses the features of Labov's model and narrative structure in her "A Real Durwan". These techniques are enriching the qualities of narratives. The present study attempts to prove how narrative structure and Labov's model gives story completeness.

**Key Words:** Narration, Narrative structure, Narratology, Labovian Model, Immigrants, Story Writing, Graphic Narrative.

## Introduction

Jhumpa Lahiri was born on July 11, 1967. She has the Bengali background by her parentage. She is interested in learning various languages, which she mentioned in her recent work, "In Other Words". She possessed a number of awards to her credit in the literary field. She is a leading diasporic writer holds a distinctive place in the literary world. Her short stories represent the experiences of the various set of people both in India and America. Most of the research articles on Lahiri focused only on the viewpoint of feminism, culture and gender studies, thematic approach etc. "The narrative is not the story itself but rather the telling of the story" (miamioh.edu). According to the above saying, Lahiri's way of storytelling is something related to her personal touch. Since she too is an immigrant she perfectly explicit the feelings in her narratives. This research paper focuses her "A Real Durwan" one of the short stories in her famous collection "Interpreter of Maladies" in narratological point of view by using Labov's model.

Lahiri has won several awards, including the O. Henry Award, The TransAtlantic Award from the Henfield Foundation (1993), and PEN/Hemingway Award for Best Fiction for the short story "Interpreter of Maladies" (1999). Recently, she has won the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award (2008) and the Asian American Literary Award (2009), both for Unaccustomed Earth.

## Features of Lahiri's Works

She has to her credit two novels, two short stories collection, a non-fiction and some uncollected non-fictions. The first novel *The Namesake* (2003) deals with the events in Ganguli family. The entire novel pictures the immigrants' problem in a foreign country. The second novel *The Lowland* (2013) is about two brothers who have different nature. Lahiri's first short story collection *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) exposes various themes of the day to day life. Another collection of short stories *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) deals with the second and third generations problems in immigrant lands. Her non-fiction *In Other Words* (2016) is the recent work which she wrote in the Italian Language later it was translated into English by Ann Goldstein. Apart from the above works she has published number short stories in *The New Yorker* includes *Cooking Lessons: The Long Way Home* in 2004, *Improvisations: Rice* in 2009 and *Reflections: Notes from a Literary Apprenticeship* in 2011.

## About the Theorist

William Labov was born in 1927 at New Jersey. He is a sociolinguist who along with Joshua Waletzky introduced a new pattern to read narratives. The model helps the reader to understand the story better. Also, it enriches the in-depth meaning of a narrative. After 600 interviews with various groups of people, Labov shaped six aspects as a model to analyze the structure of a story. The model includes Abstract, Orientation, Complication, Evaluation, Resolution, and Coda. It is not necessary all the six are included and in order in a story.

## An Overview of the Model:

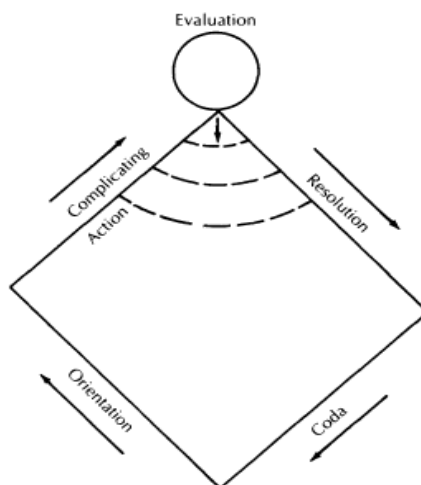


Figure 1: William Labov's Model

1. Abstract - It deals with the introductory part of a narrative. It gives a small introduction to the characters and idea of the story.
2. Orientation - This aspect provides additional information about the characters and plot to the readers.
3. Complicating Action - This is an aspect which has the actual events of the story. It deals with a problem.
4. Evaluation - It says the further development of the complicating action. How the characters getting involved in the story has been dealing with this aspect.
5. Resolution - This is the resolution part which gives a conclusion to the story with a solution to the problem.
6. Coda - This aspect deals with the message of the story and relevance of the contemporary world.

### **Application of the Model:**

This paper is the application of Labov's model in Lahiri's A Real Durwan. This is one of the stories in the famous collection Interpreter of Maladies. Boori Ma is the main character of the story. She has a good background but now she is a poor sweeper in the particular apartment. To console her poverty she recited her luxurious past to the people. Even though they have doubt in her saying they look her as an entertainer. She acts as a durwan for the building. The people things they do not need a real durwan for the building because they have no valuables. Later in the story, they equipped their status and blamed Boori Ma for a theft. Poor Boori Ma too lost her savings in the market but says nothing when they charged her. She only says that

she did not inform the robbers. Anyway, at the end, they sent her out and looking for a real durwan for the building. Thus, the story ends. The following application will enrich the meaning and gives the story completeness.

### **The Abstract:**

The first aspect deals with the introductory things. Mostly, in every story, the opening paragraph reveals the main characters or central idea of the narrative. In "A Real Durwan" also the very opening line: "Boori Ma, sweeper of the stairwell, had not slept for two nights (70)" discloses the story in a nutshell. The line tells the protagonist Boori Ma is a sweeper and she struggled for sleep for the past two nights. This is a usual pattern for the writers to introduce the main character in the opening paragraph.

### **The Orientation:**

It reveals who, when, what of the narrative. It is about the time, place, characters, and their role in the story. This part will create a kind of feelings towards the characters. In this story, it informs Boori Ma's background. She is sixty-four year old, talkative, and shifted to Calcutta because of partition. During the partition, she departed her husband, four daughters and her house. Through the orientation part, readers can understand the characters' role in the story and what kind of actions are there in this regard. Boori Ma's misfortunes are not detailed here. But through her repeated wordings: "Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them (71)" readers came to know the comforts in her past life.

The apartment people do not have any doubt as she is a refugee since the accent of her Bengali language. When she chronicled her easier times she stated her daughter was married to a school principal. They invited the Mayor and offered high feast: "We married her to a school principal. The rice was cooked in rosewater. The Mayor was invited. Everybody washed their fingers in pewter bowls (71)".

### **The Complicating Action:**

This aspect reveals the further proceedings of the character in the story with a problem. In this story, Boori Ma who once had a good background now suffered as a sweeper in the apartment: "What kind of landowner ended up sweeping stairs? (72)". It was the comment of Mr. Dalal of the third floor. "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes, but she is the victim of changing times (72)." is the comment of Mr. Chatterjee. These comments on Boori Ma make the reader believe that she was a rich woman in the past. But contradicted to the above comments there is another belief that she was working at a zamindar family and now she exaggerating the past events. Another complication in the story comes at the end that is she charged with a theft in the apartment.

### **The Evaluation:**

It states the events related to the complications. It provides apparent points to the readers regarding the development of the story. In reality, everyone the apartment have doubt whether Boori Ma really have the rich background or not. Anyway, they look her as a good

entertainer. None in the apartment owned costly things except Mrs. Misra who has a telephone. Even though they are thankful to Boori Ma stands as a gatekeeper for the house.

On a particular day, Boori Ma suffered a lot because of mites. Mrs. Dalal who had a soft corner on Boori Ma gave her food items. Mrs. Dalal examined her and said it is not because of mites and it is prickly heat. She also offered her powder for the problem. She often has this kind of talk to Boori Ma and this time she is ready to give her new bed. As she has some skin problem Mrs. Dalal volunteer and only she and her husband have some pity on Boori Ma in the apartment. Things went on like this and that afternoon Boori Ma visited the residents as usual. She thought of Mrs. Dalal's offer of the powder as she feels itching in her back. When she started to claim up she watched a rickshaw pulled up Mr. Dalal to the gate. He said to Boori Ma to carry the new basins to the upstairs. It is new to the apartment he decided to place one in his home another one in the stairwell of the building.

Mr. and Mrs. Dalal's argument regarding the basins going on and in the meantime Boori Ma claimed to her place and suffered still the sore hip because of the newspaper bed. Controversies spread all over the apartment regarding the basins: "Are the Dalals the only ones who can improve the conditions of this building? (79)". The only supporting family of Boori Ma planned to go Simla for ten days. The trip makes many changes in the apartment. When Dalals started their journey assured Boori Ma to buy blankets.

Things have changed when the other wives of the apartment planning for renovations. Labors occupy the building for the renovation purposes. They work day and night so Boori Ma cannot control the traffic: "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)". Here the complication began to evaluate in Boori Ma's life. She could not cook in her place in the apartment as the workers roaming here and there for the renovation work. So she moved to the rooftop for cooking and she cannot use the basins downstairs. She forgets her tea and she suffered a lot for sleeping. Gradually her mind expects Mr. and Mrs. Dalal's return. She feels lonely and bit boring and so started wandering the neighborhood to relax. She enjoys her savings in small treats. The above events are the proof for Boori Ma who later accused by the people.

### **The culmination:**

This is a recommended aspect which is apt for the present story as it has the peak of the complication. That afternoon Boori Ma returned from her visit to the marketplace. The people were waiting for her and echoing the basin in the downstairs had been robbed. Boori Ma said nothing and stood silently with her reed broom. All the residents scolded at her as she is the informer to the thieves: "She informed the robbers. Where was she when she was supposed to guard the gate? (81)". But they do not know her savings and skeleton keys were also stolen. Adding fuel to the fire another reported that she has been talking to strangers in the market. They scolded her for her lies in the past when she talked about her luxurious life. Now they are not ready to believe her words. The increasing status of the people turned their mind into a real durwan for the apartment as they have valuables. They seek the advice of Mr. Chatterjee's in this regard. He suggested that building seeks a real durwan. This is the most complicated part of the story. From the beginning, they celebrated Boori Ma as an

entertainer and a guard for the building. When people's mind turned to the improvisation of the status they tossed her into the street.

### **Resolution:**

The fifth aspect deals with what finally happened in the story. At this point, after accusing Boori Ma the residents begin to search for the real durwan. This is the solution only for the residents. But for Boori Ma there is no solution and in the viewpoint of Boori Ma, the story is open-ended.

### **Coda:**

This is the last aspect in Labov's model deals with the significance of the narrative to the contemporary world. Boori Ma's life reflects the immigrants' society. Many people suffered like Boori Ma because of partition. They lose their originality and looking for a new life. Similarly, Boori Ma was trying to adapt the new world but she fails. Wherever people go they cannot forget the past and all the things will enrich their life experience. In that way, Boori Ma vacated the place and expecting a new place for her.

### **Discourse examination:**

It is another suggested part to analyze the story in a deeper way. It is a kind of method to deconstruct the sentences to get the inner meaning of a text. The implicative meaning of a sentence reveals the original meaning of the story. For example, "Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them (71)". The sentence urged that Boori Ma does not care about the apartment people's opinion on her rich background. It is her habit to blow her own trumpet of her richness. But when she accused of the theft, at last, she said: "Believe me, believe me. I did not inform the robbers (81)". This sentence has the implied meaning that she urged the people to believe her in the robbery issue.

Another example from the text is: "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building (82)". This sentence implied that Boori Ma doesn't change but the status of the people and building has changed. So they are in need of a real durwan to protect the building. "From the pile of belongings, Boori Ma kept only her broom (82)" explicit the meaning how honest she is.

### **Archetype:**

This recommended aspect reveals the pattern of the story. With the use of this aspect, a story can be categorized as linear, non-linear, personal or any other narratives. Here, on the whole, the story comes under the non-linear narrative category. Usually, narratives have a beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning part character introduction, their part in plot and central idea of the plot will be there. In the middle part, complications will be there. Also, the seriousness of the problem will be raised. The final part deals with solution to all the complications. Sometimes it may change as non-linear narratives which do not have any order. Based on this, many theorists framed their own model to analyze a text. Similarly,

William Labov framed a model to interpret a narrative. But, it is only helpful to understand the story.

Adding the archetype part will help the readers to know what kind of pattern the author used in his/her narrative. On this basis, the story does not follow any order of the old pattern. It begins normally without any problem and develops as a description. But in the story Boori Ma recollected her past and says it in her words. This is a kind of flashback. So, the pattern is missing here. Finally, it has some problem and ends with two ways. One is the solution and another open-ended. Thus the story comes under a simple graphic narrative. A simple graphic narrative is a kind of narrative structure which has the order of character introduction, description of the events, complication of the plot and denouement. This is what exactly the story has. So, this story has the simple graphic narrative structure.

### **Conclusion:**

William Labov's model of the narrative structure is helpful to understand the short story in a better way. Additionally included aspects help the story to analyze in a different method. Through this method author's uniqueness is pictured out. In that way, Jhumpa Lahiri's excellence in storytelling is publicized. Lahiri used the graphic narrative structure in "A Real Durwan". The suggested parts are only applicable to this story. It may vary when it will be applied to any other stories of Lahiri. There is scope to do even better analysis on the model in future studies. Besides Labov's model acts as a tool to analyze the story and through that the author's talent has been exposed.

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