

A Real Durwan



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JHUMPA LAHIRI

Born in London to the daughter of Bengali Indian immigrants, Lahiri was raised in U.S. from the age of two and considers herself an American. Growing up in Rhode Island, she felt pressure to be both “loyal to the old world” of her heritage and “fluent in the new.” Lahiri received her B.A. in English Literature from the Barnard College of Columbia University, and as well as two M.A. degrees, an M.F.A. degree, and a Ph.D. from Boston University. She has published short story collections and three novels, as well as several nonfiction pieces. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 for her short story collection, *Interpreter of Maladies*. Her first novel, *The Namesake*, was published in 2003 and adapted to a feature-length film in 2007. She followed it up with another short story collection in 2008, *Unaccustomed Earth*, and the 2013 novel, *Lowland*. Her literary works focus mostly on lives of immigrants or their children. They often explore intergenerational conflict in families as well as the tension she has personally experienced between the pressure to assimilate and the desire to keep one’s culture close and present. Lahiri is currently teaching writing at Princeton University.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Partition of India occurred in 1947, following India’s independence from the British Empire. Great Britain ruled India for roughly 300 years until right after World War II, when the Indian people forced independence through resistance and protest. In 1947, the territory was divided into Pakistan and India, with distinct territories of Bengal and Punjab. The division occurred along religious lines—that is, Pakistan was majority-Muslim and India was majority-Hindu. However, the reality was not so clear-cut, and the British left fairly quickly. Violence between religious groups resulted in the deaths of 1-2 million people and 14-15 million more displaced. It remains a major defining event for all of Southeast Asia.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jhumpa Lahiri’s other works tack similar themes of displacement, migration, assimilation, and alienation. Her short story collection, *Unaccustomed Earth*, explores the relationship between immigrants and immigrant families, while also reflecting on the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The Indian writer Aravind Adiga also encapsulates the experience of the Indian lower class in his novels, *Last Man in Tower* (2011) and *White Tiger* (2008). *Last Man in Tower* follows a group of building

residents as they are offered the chance to sell their homes for a great price—as long as they all agree. The book details the lengths they will go in order to get what they think they deserve. The narrator of *White Tiger* desperately tries to escape his working-class life in India, a journey that inevitably ends in tragedy. Two other notable short story collections examine the many perspectives of immigrant culture in America: Robert Olen Butler’s 1992 collections, *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*, focuses on the Vietnamese community in American following the war, while Junot Diaz’s *Drown* (1996) uses Spanish slang, nerd culture, and dialect to reflect on his Dominican American upbringing. Other works of “partition literature” (which, like *A Real Durwan*, tackle the division of India and Pakistan into separate nations) include *Mottled Dawn* by Saadat Hasan Monto and *Train to India: Memories of Another Bengal* by Maloy Krishna Dhar.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Real Durwan
- **When Written:** 1999
- **Where Written:** United States
- **When Published:** 1999
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Bengal, India
- **Climax:** The disappearance of the wash basin and the keys
- **Antagonist:** Building residents
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

As the Romans Do. Jhumpa Lahiri decided to undertake the study of Italian a few years ago. She moved to Rome, Italy with her family in 2012 and is now fluent in Italian. She currently writes only in Italian and then translates her writing into English if necessary.

Who Goes There? The term “durwan” is rooted in the Persian word *darwān*, which translates as “door-keeping” or “door-guarding.”



PLOT SUMMARY

Boori Ma is a 64-year-old woman, frail from many years of manual work. She lives and works in a residential building in Calcutta, India. Each day, like the one that begins the story, she sweeps the steps and cleans around the building. As she cleans,

she talks about the luxuries of her former life, one that existed before Partition (the division of India and Pakistan into separate countries) when she still lived in Bengal. She claims that she had a husband and four daughters, a two-story house complete with marble floors, and a yard brimming with fruit trees and hibiscus blossoms. She often changes the details in her stories, doubling the size of her estate each time she talks about it and alternating between different versions of how she crossed the border into Calcutta. Boori Ma always ends her stories by saying some variation of “Believe me, don’t believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them.”

The residents find Boori Ma’s outlandish memories unreliable but thoroughly entertaining, and they respect her work as an unofficial *durwan*, or “doorkeeper,” for their building. One resident, Mr. Chatterjee, proclaims that Boori Ma spins nothing but lies, but that her stories are harmless and that she’s simply “the victim of changing times.” Mr. Chatterjee has not left his balcony or even opened a newspaper since Independence, but all of the residents greatly respect his opinions.

After performing her morning duties, Boori Ma climbs to the roof to beat her quilts, which she thinks are infested with mites. She complains to a resident named Mrs. Dalal, claiming that the mites are “eating [her] alive” at night, but Mrs. Dalal examines Boori Ma’s skin and finds that she is free of mite bites. Mrs. Dalal suggests that Boori Ma is suffering from a common case of prickly heat, but Boori Ma “prefer[s]” to think that it’s mites rather than something as boring and common as prickly heat. Examining Boori Ma’s worn-out bedding, Mrs. Dalal promises to get the woman new quilts soon.

It begins to rain, and Boori Ma’s quilts are ruined, but she is heartened by Mrs. Dalal’s promise. Shortly after, Mr. Dalal, who works a low-level job for a wholesale manufacturer of toilet parts, returns home with news of a big promotion to management. In celebration, he has purchased two **wash basins**, one for his home and one for the apartment building to use communally. Though the residents profess some jealousy at the new acquisition, they all jump at the chance to use such a luxury.

When the Dalals leave for vacation, still celebrating their windfall, the other residents find themselves inspired to also make changes to building out of a spirit of competition. They pawn precious heirlooms to paint the building, paint the shutters, and exterminate any pests. However, since the building is full of laborers running up and down the stairs, Boori Ma can’t complete her usual tasks. With more free time on her hands than she knows what to do with—and aching limbs from sleeping on newspapers now that her quilts are ruined—Boori Ma finds that walks around the neighborhood are a balm for her sore body and a good way to pass the time.

One day, as she walks through the market, Boori Ma begins to spend some of her life savings on small treats, like cashews and sugarcane juice. As she wanders deeper and deeper into the

market, she feels a tug on the end of her sari and finds that her **skeleton keys** to the building and lifesavings are gone.

When Boori Ma returns home, the residents are gathered, angry that the community basin has been ripped out of the wall and stolen. They turn on Boori Ma, accusing her of being in cahoots with the thief. Mr. Chatterjee delivers the final verdict, deciding that the building needs a “real *durwan*.” Despite her protests of innocence—“Believe me, believe me”—they dismiss her from employment and the building, tossing Boori Ma and her belongings out onto the street. She leaves the building, carrying only a broom in her hand.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Boori Ma – Boori Ma, the story’s protagonist, is a 64-year-old Bengali woman who has been a refugee since Partition in 1947. As a *durwan*, or “doorkeeper,” it is her job to clean the apartment building where she lives and watch the front door in exchange for a place to sleep and eat. She is an outsider in comparison to the people who live in the building, since she is a solitary woman, in a lower class, and from a different region (Bengal). Each day, as she cleans, Boori Ma recounts the ease of her former life prior to Partition and the difficulty she has encountered since then. She claims that she once had a husband and four daughters, a comfortable two-story house, and a yard spilling over with guavas, dates, and hibiscus flowers. The details of her tales change often, entertaining the residents but leaving the truth hazy. Although Boori Ma is a laborer in the building, working for a roof over her head, the residents seem to genuinely respect her, especially Mrs. Dalal. When Mr. Dalal receives a promotion at work and installs a communal **wash basin** in the building, the other residents decide to make further updates to the building; however, the flurry of construction displaces Boori Ma from her daily routine. She goes for walks in the marketplace, where the **skeleton keys** to the building and her meager life savings are stolen. She returns to the apartment building to find the wash basin missing and the residents angry with her. Although Boori Ma is adamant that she’s telling the truth and had no role in the theft—her pleas of “Believe me, believe me” feel genuine and urgent compared to the flippant way she would end her tall tales with “Believe me, don’t believe me”—but the residents won’t listen. They decide that she has lied about her involvement with the crime (implying that she gave her keys to the thief) and throw her and her belongings out onto the street. She leaves, penniless, carrying only her broom.

Mr. Dalal – The husband of Mrs. Dalal and a lower-level toilet part salesman. He lives the same apartment building where Boori Ma lives and works. When he is suddenly promoted to a management position at his company, his newfound moderate

wealth prompts him to buy a communal **wash basin** for the building and a private one for his home. This influences other residents to make changes themselves, from painting the building to hiring an exterminator. After this promotion, he and Mrs. Dalal go on vacation and are not around to fend for Boori Ma when the other residents accuse her of stealing the basin and dismiss her from the building.

Mrs. Dalal – The wife of Mr. Dalal. She lives in the same apartment building where Boori Ma lives and works and is the main protector Boori Ma. She insists on providing Boori Ma with additional materials, including new quilts, as hers are tattered and worn. However, she never follows through on this promise. When Mrs. Dalal's husband receives a promotion, the two of them leave for a vacation and are not present when the other residents accuse Boori Ma of stealing the **basin** and dismiss her from the building.

Mr. Chatterjee – Mr. Chatterjee is known as the resident intellectual of the apartment building where Boori Ma, Mr. Dalal, Mrs. Dalal, and Mrs. Misra live, even though the narrator shares that he has not opened a newspaper since 1947. When the communal **wash basin** in the building is stolen and the other residents want to condemn Boori Ma for the crime, it is Mr. Chatterjee who is given the final word and decides to dismiss her from the building. His opinion is the most respected in the building.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mrs. Misra – A widow who lives on the second floor of the same apartment building where Boori Ma, Mr. Dalal, Mrs. Dalal, and Mr. Chatterjee live. She is the only resident with a private telephone.

TERMS

Durwan – The term *durwan* comes from the Persian word *darwān*, meaning “door-keeping” or “door-guarding.” **Boori Ma** is working in this capacity in all but title. After all, as the narrator mentions, being a *durwan* is “no job for a woman” under normal circumstances. As the residents begin to make changes to the building, Boori Ma's alleged crime of giving her **keys** to a thief who removes the **wash basin** is a perfect excuse for the residents to dismiss her and install a “real” *durwan*, thus making the building seem nicer. The word “real” here implies that the new *durwan* would be a man, aligning with the traditional requirements for a *durwan*.

Partition – Partition refers to the formation of India and Pakistan as independent nations, following Great Britain's departure from India in 1947. Although they were supposedly divided along religious lines—India as majority-Hindu and Pakistan as majority-Muslim—the violence and displacement that followed on account of religious strife left more than a

million people dead and fourteen to fifteen million people as refugees. **Boori Ma** was one of them, telling the building's residents that she “crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist” and lost her husband and daughters to the “turmoil.”

Monsoon – Monsoon is an annual season of heavy rainfall throughout Southeast Asia. It usually lasts from May through September. Rainfall amounts can be measured in feet, and flooding is typical. Calcutta, the setting of “A Real Durwan,” receives some of the heaviest rainfall each season. As the story opens, **Boori Ma** loses her quilts to the beginning of the monsoon season. The rain continues intermittently throughout the remainder of the story, depriving Boori Ma of her precious private space on the rooftop of the apartment building.

Boori – The name *Boori* comes from Bangla or Bengali, the majority language of Bengal. It translates as “old woman.” In the context of the story, it is interesting to note that the term comes from **Boori Ma**'s own language, rather than the language of the building's residents. Additionally, as *boori* means “old woman,” the protagonist's actual name is never revealed.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TRUTH AND MEMORY

Jhumpa Lahiri's “A Real Durwan” captures a snapshot of life in a small Bengali apartment building. Boori Ma, a 64-year-old woman with no other options, works and lives in the building as a housekeeper and unofficial *durwan*, or “doorkeeper.” She never officially applied for the position, but rather assumed the role years prior. Throughout the story, Boori Ma's past gradually emerges as she recounts her past life to the building's residents, detailing the wealth she left behind as a refugee following the partition of India in 1947. Despite Boori Ma's insistence that she once lived a life of luxury—the details of which seem to change daily—the truth remains vague. Having no faith in Boori Ma's embellished memories, the residents challenge her, correct her, and try to catch her in a lie, though they are nonetheless fond of her. However, this takes a turn at the end of the story when the building's **skeleton keys** disappear from Boori Ma's sari, and the building's new community **wash basin**—a point of pride for the residents—is stolen. At this point, the residents move from mistrusting Boori Ma's memory to mistrusting her truth, believing her responsible for the theft. With this, Lahiri asks the reader to question where memory

and truth intersect, and how people can convolute both for their own purposes. As the story unfolds, Lahiri argues that memories, whether they're factual or not, can contain a kind of emotional truth, and that on the flip side, truth can be just as flimsy and subjective as memory.

While the building's residents take Boori Ma's memories as nothing more than entertaining fictions, to Boori Ma these memories are underpinned with real emotional truth, regardless of the veracity of the details. Every day as she goes about her chores, Boori Ma recites "the details of her plight and losses suffered since her deportation to Calcutta after Partition." Boori Ma laments being "separated from a husband, four daughters, a two-story brick house, a rosewood *almari*, and a number of coffer boxes." While the more granular details of Boori Ma's past life seem to change from day to day—the narrator notes that "every day, the perimeters of her former estate seemed to double, as did the contents of her *almari* and coffer boxes"—the details aren't what Boori Ma is concerned with. When the local children press her to confirm the details of her stories, Boori Ma responds in exasperation, "Why demand specifics?" She also frequently ends her tales with the phrase, "Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them." With this, Boori Ma suggests that she doesn't care if anyone believes her stories; instead, what she wants her listeners to glean from her so-called memories is that she lived a better life before Partition. With this in mind, it seems that Boori Ma's ever-changing list of what she's lost since Partition does not necessarily mean that she is intentionally lying or changing her story. Rather, it demonstrates the underlying emotional truth of her experiences: she has shouldered deep and painful losses in her life, and with each day passing it seems like she's lost twice as much as the day before.

However, the story nonetheless suggests that memory is a flimsy thing and can't always be trusted. As they argue about dismissing Boori Ma from her unofficial post as doorkeeper, Mr. Chatterjee chimes in, "Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new." Even the narrator admits early on that "she garbled facts. She contradicted herself." Yet, "her rants were so persuasive, her fretting so vivid, that it was not easy to dismiss her." Plus, her "throaty impostures hurt no one. All agreed that she was a superb entertainer." With this, the narrator emphasizes that Boori Ma's eccentric cataloging of her past never hindered her work, nor did it make her unacceptable as a fellow resident. However, in aiming to provide "truth" for her dismissal—wanting to take some sort of action after the theft—the residents collectively remember her as something different, something sinister and morally bankrupt. "For years we put up with your lies," the residents exclaim, reshaping their own memories to provide justification for firing her.

Ultimately, the residents' decision to kick Boori Ma out of the building and dismiss her from her post illustrates how truth, like memory, can be subjective and twisted for convenience. In the

end, the reality of the situation—whether Boori Ma played no role in the theft or whether she gave her keys to a thief to steal the basin—is as unclear as the veracity of Boori Ma's memories. Boori Ma remains adamant that someone stole her keys: in the market, she feels a tug on the end of her sari and suddenly her keys and lifesavings are gone. Her final words are, "Believe me. Believe me." This is quite the departure from the beginning of the narrative, when Boori Ma shakes off the residents' doubt about the veracity of her memories, flippantly saying, "Believe me, don't believe me." Boori Ma's abrupt change in language suggests that this time she is telling the truth—the real truth. However, reeling from the loss of their beloved basin, the residents use the theft as a reason to send Boori Ma away and find a real *durwan* for the building. Significantly, the theft happens in the midst of the residents' growing obsession with making their building appear better and fancier, so it seems that they already were wanting an official doorkeeper—and that it is merely convenient for them to twist Boori Ma into a criminal in order to fire her. The narrator also points out that "none of [the residents] spoke directly to Boori Ma" as they argued about her fate. They never seek the truth and instead come up with their own version of the truth—that Boori Ma "informed the robbers" of the basin and gave them her keys—for their own convenience. Truth, then, proves to be just as unreliable as memory, and the harsh condemnation of Boori Ma suggests that people will use their version of the truth to benefit themselves, even at the expense of others. In the end, it seems that neither truth nor memory can be fully trusted.



MATERIALISM, STATUS, AND CONTENTMENT

Overwhelmed by the deep and all-consuming losses that she's experienced throughout her life,

Boori Ma lives squarely in the past, before the Partition of India and Pakistan left her destitute as a refugee. In contrast, the building's residents, armed with a little more money and marginally better social standing than the poor doorkeeper, live in the present and the future. Instead of lamenting over their pasts, the residents focus on how they can better their present and work toward an even better future. While this may seem admirable at first, the story makes it clear that the residents are trying to advance themselves for the wrong reasons: to seem better or more impressive in the eyes of others. With this, Lahiri provides a sharp social criticism, suggesting that placing too much emphasis material possessions can create a perpetual sense of dissatisfaction for people. Additionally, it can blind people to the inherent worth of their fellow human beings, ultimately causing them to become judgmental and cruel in the pursuit of status.

Prior to the news of Mr. Dalal's promotion at his job, the buildings' residents are not overly preoccupied with matters of materialism. The building itself is "a very old building, the kind

with bathwater that still had to be stored in drums, windows without glass, and privy scaffolds made of bricks.” In fact, the residents appear more concerned about personal worth and respect of each other—materialism has not yet blinded them. The narrator informs the reader that “no one in the building has anything worth stealing,” and that Mrs. Misra’s personal telephone is really the only exception. The narrator conveys how “the residents liked that Boori Ma [...] stood guard between them and the outside world. Only one paragraph later, the narrator returns to this, emphasizing that “the residents were thankful that Boori Ma patrolled activities in the alley.” Boori Ma, in return, served her position well, “she honored that responsibility” and gave it all of her effort. In a moment of socialization, the residents assure Boori Ma that she is “always welcome” in their homes. As it rains, she drifts “in and out of various households,” as if part of the extended family. Clearly, at this point in the story, the residents are content just enjoying each other’s company.

Mr. Dalal’s promotion—which inspires him to bring home two new **wash basins**, one for his family and one for the rest of the residents to share—is the catalyst for the entire building to transform. His good fortune, initially looked upon with jealousy, inspires the other residents to make their own materialistic changes. Mr. Chatterjee, the resident intellectual, dubs the community basin “A sure sign of the changing times.” By “changing times,” he may be talking about modern technology more broadly, but it’s implied that he may be referencing the materialistic changes that result in the building. The new wash basin is not just a step toward convenience but rather signals that more is on the horizon. With change comes competition, as the other resentful residents quickly ask, “Are the Dalals the only ones who can improve the conditions of the building?” The wives of the building exchange precious keepsakes to contribute. One barter wedding bracelets for a fresh coat of paint, one sells a sewing machine to pay for an exterminator, and another pawns silver bowls to paint the shutters. Rather than a communal feeling of improvement, the building changes actually emerge from competitiveness. Instead of using the funds for individual assets (such as a private telephone), they contribute to communal property to gain status in the eyes of their neighbors while simultaneously losing touch with one another.

Although the building does begin to look nicer, the residents’ growing obsession with materialism and outward appearances has a steep human cost: the residents begin to abandon their own personal values and see less value in other people, sacrificing worth for status. As the residents increasingly value the outward appearance of their building, they value Boori Ma less and less. They see more sense in improving their building, and thereby improving their own social status, than in continuing to house a vulnerable older woman. When the basin gets stolen and the residents blame Boori Ma, one resident

exclaims: “Boori Ma has endangered the security of this building. We have valuables. The widow Mrs. Misra lives alone with her phone. What should we do?” In the aftermath of the basin being stolen, it seems that the residents are now solely concerned with the safety of their material possessions, and are quick to devalue condemn Boori Ma if it means maintaining their elevated status. Moments later, as Mr. Chatterjee mulls over what to do, he glances significantly at “the bamboo scaffolding that now surrounded his balcony. The shutters behind him, colorless for as long as he could remember, had been painted yellow.” After taking in the building’s improved appearance, Mr. Chatterjee announces the final verdict: “Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building. What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*.” Before the flurry of consumerism began, Mr. Chatterjee had said that “Boori Ma’s mouth is full of ashes, but she is the victim of changing times”—even though he didn’t believe her tall tales, he had empathy for the woman. Now that Mr. Chatterjee is swept up by materialism, though, he abandons his empathetic outlook, supporting Boori Ma’s dismissal and therefore showing that he has come to value things over people.

As the story closes, the reader’s last impression is Boori Ma walking slowly away from the house, broom in her hand, muttering, “Believe me. Believe me.” As an outsider, an older woman alone in the world, her options are few if any. She will most likely end up living on the streets, as the residents would likely be aware. The last image raises the question of whether or not social advancement is really more important than a human life. Boori Ma has been cast out over something as trivial as a wash basin, and it is implied that the residents may never reach the point at which they are satisfied with what they have.



SOCIAL DIVISION AND ALIENATION

“A Real Durwan” focuses on the simple life and tragic turn of events for Boori Ma, a poor *durwan*, or “doorkeeper,” in a Bengali apartment building.

She is introduced from the first sentence living out her days by cleaning the building for the other residents and reciting details about the life of luxury she used to live. From the first line, in fact, she is identified as “Boori Ma, sweeper of the stairwell.” By focusing on such a character, the narrator calls attention to Boori Ma’s “Otherness,” or the ways in which she is unlike her fellow residents. In doing so, the story illustrates how difference plays a role in one’s life, particularly in the story’s setting of 1960s or 1970s Bengal. Given her position, both what she was born into and what happened to her along the way, Boori Ma has few options in the world and even fewer than she had years ago. Regardless of whether or not the reader should believe Boori Ma’s stories of her past, she remains female, unmarried, unskilled, and foreign in her

country. As Boori Ma's situation gets worse and worse throughout the story, Jhumpa Lahiri suggests that barriers surrounding gender, ethnicity, and class in post-Partition India are oppressive and limiting and create a harsh "us versus them" dynamic.

From the beginning of the story, Boori Ma is set apart from the building's other residents. The opening paragraphs describe Boori Ma's physical appearance, unlike the other characters. The narrator notes her age, frail figure, and swollen joints. Even her voice is "brittle with sorrow." While the reader does not enter her thoughts, Boori Ma's body and voice speak of a hard life. Her memories shed some light on her status: she claims to have had a husband and four daughters, and she mentions a daughter's grand wedding, yet she is all alone in Bengal. Without a husband or son at this time and place, her life and her income are quite limited. While the truth of Boori Ma's memories remain debatable, what is clear is that she is a refugee from the Partition of 1947. The story notes that "No one doubted she was a refugee; the accent in her Bengali made that clear." With a linguistic marker, she is never fully assimilated or accepted into a stringently divided society. Boori Ma is marked for that which she cannot change: her gender, her country of origin, and her solitude. However, her economic situation appears just as immovable. She is in an entirely separate class from the other residents of building. At one point, Mrs. Dalal notes that Boori Ma wears a cheap sari, "with a border the color of a dirty pond." The narrator adds that it is "cut in a style no longer sold in shops." With this detail, the story implies that Boori Ma has been wearing the same clothing for years with no disposable income to replace them, a visible marker that further alienates her from her neighbors.

When Boori Ma has downtime to visit with the residents of the building, the narrator notes that she knows better than to go inside the apartment. Instead she "crouches" near the doorway. A similar verb is only used one other time in the story, to describe the manual laborers who work on the building. They too "squat" during their break around the perimeter of the building. Like these men, Boori Ma is positioned squarely as a laborer, not a resident deserving of a seat at the table. Boori Ma's crouching—halfway between a seated and standing position—also reflects her ethnic Otherness, as she is perched precariously between two cultures. Furthermore, Boori Ma owns very little. The news of Mr. Dalal's promotion—suddenly propelling his family into a life of relative abundance—takes place shortly after Boori Ma's quilts disintegrate while hanging outside in the rain. Not only is one of her few possessions destroyed, but now she must sleep on newspaper. And even though Mrs. Dalal promises to provide Boori Ma with new bedding, the woman gets swept up in her own newfound wealth and fails to provide for Boori Ma. That Boori Ma is thrust to the sidelines in this instance, descending deeper and deeper into poverty with the loss of her quilts, further

ostracizes her from the other residents.

Just as Boori Ma straddles two cultures as an immigrant, so too does her status as an unofficial *durwan*, or "doorkeeper"—not quite a full employee, nor a real resident—leave her with little stability or protection and emphasize her otherness. The narrator notes that "over the years, Boori Ma's services came to resemble those of a real *durwan*." However, "under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman," suggesting that Boori Ma's status as less than a "real *durwan*" centers on her gender, which also makes her "less than" in a patriarchal society. When things fall to pieces and the building's beloved new **wash basin** is stolen, the residents don't question Boori Ma in the hallway but force her to the roof, where they plant her "on one side of the clothesline and started screaming from the other." The position has no utility except to physically represent her inferiority—as a woman, an immigrant, a poor person, and a laborer, Boori Ma is set apart from the rest of society. The residents quickly decide that banishing Boori Ma will solve all of their problems: "What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*," says a resident named Mr. Chatterjee. With this, the residents "tossed out Boori Ma. All were eager to begin their search for a real *durwan*." The residents jump on the opportunity to dismiss Boori Ma from her post, emphasizing once again how she is clearly the other—dispelled from their fold, and made to feel like she is not a "real" member of the community despite living and working in the building for many years. Ultimately, all of Boori Ma's identifiers set her apart in a society governed by rigid class divisions and gender roles: as an immigrant, a woman, and a low-level worker, she is deeply limited and vulnerable in a way that her male, married, middle-class residents aren't.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SKELETON KEYS

The keys Boori Ma carries symbolize access, not only to the physical structure of the apartment building where she lives and works, but also to a particular way of life. Having lost all of her wealth and status after the Partition of India and Pakistan, the jingle of the skeleton keys on the end of her sari is constant reminder of her diminished role in society and the position and duty she now holds. Yet even this lower class is a significant improvement upon the destitute poverty of living as a displaced refugee, and the keys are her only access to the security and livelihood that her job as an unofficial *durwan*, or "doorkeeper," offers her. Boori Ma is not of the same class and society as the other residents of the building, yet she lives among them, visits with them, and earns

their respect. Once the keys are stolen, though, she loses access to that life, and the apartment residents throw her out onto the street. From that point on, the proverbial door is closed, and she is once more on her own to navigate the uncertainty of her life as a solitary, impoverished woman.



THE WASH BASIN

The communal wash basin that Mr. Dalal purchases for the building's residents to use is a physical representation of wealth and status, and inspires jealousy, competition, and momentum toward materialistic change. The basin causes the other residents to be shaken from their economic class complacency and want to do whatever is necessary—including pawning valuable objects and dismissing Boori Ma from her post in favor of a “real *durwan*”—to change the public perception of their little community. Even though none of them (save for Mr. Dalal) suddenly have more money, they all become consumed with trying to make their building *look* like a place where wealthier people would live. The wash basin is not only the catalyst for these actions in the second half of the story, but it also symbolizes possibility for the building's residents.

truth. Readers can hold on to this line throughout the story, as other characters question the veracity of Boori Ma's memories. Regardless of the actual events of her past, the narrator reminds the reader that Boori Ma's voice is “brittle with sorrows.” No matter what has specifically happened, Boori Ma has lived a life of sorrow and hardship, and that is what is important.

“Have I mentioned that I crossed the border with just two bracelets on my wrist? Yet there was a day when my feet touched nothing but marble. Believe me, don't believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them.”

Related Characters: Boori Ma (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is the first reference from Boori Ma in regards to her deportation during Partition. The bracelets she was wearing would most likely have been her wedding bracelets, small valuables to retain in a time of turmoil. The time period from the border-crossing to the present setting is left completely blank. Her memories extend to pre-Partition prosperity, but crossing into India is where her story ends.

The comforts she speaks of have little meaning to those around her. They, indeed, cannot even dream of the life she claims to have led. Mrs. Dalal confirms as much later on, agreeing that a comfortable life like that is too distant for the wife of a toilet-part salesman. This sets the tone for the rest of the story, as the other residents' doubt does not seem to bother her here. However, that changes entirely at the end of the narrative, when their sudden certainty of her guilt upends her entire life.

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.

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 72



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Mariner Books edition of *Interpreter of Maladies* published in 1999.

A Real Durwan Quotes

In fact, the only thing that appeared three-dimensional about Boori Ma was her voice: brittle with sorrows, as tart as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut.

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is one of the first and only descriptions of Boori Ma. She is a frail woman, but this line highlights her past and personality embedded in her voice. She uses her voice every day to recall the events of the past, both pleasant and difficult, that may or may not be entirely accurate. Her voice—and the memories it recounts—is the most impactful aspect of Boori Ma. However, this quote, though at the beginning of the story, implies that she's not telling the

Explanation and Analysis

This quote references the tension between what Boori Ma recounts and what the residents believe about her. They catch her in small lies, as her story changes day to day. Yet, the core truth of her life remains unknown. In this passage, the narrator admits that Boori Ma makes some mistakes in her recollections, but the narrator does not say that any part of it is entirely false. After all, she “embellishes” her past, but does not necessary concoct it from the air. The manner in which she talks about her past is more powerful than the truth in this instance.

The story returns to the idea within the quote at the end of the story. At this point, she is, in fact, quite easy to dismiss from the perspective of the building’s residents. They brush away her pleas and refuse to listen to her. Over the course of the story, therefore, Boori Ma’s “rants” and “fretting” have lost all their power. The mounting materialism and search for status have blinded the residents to her vivid story-telling and the core truth embedded in her stories—that she has lived a hard life in recent years and has lost a lot.

☞ In short, over the years, Boori Ma’s services came to resemble those of a real *durwan*. Though under normal circumstances this was no job for a woman, she honored the responsibility, and maintained a vigil no less punctilious than if she were the gatekeeper of a house on Lower Circular Road, or Jodhpur Park, or any other fancy neighborhood.

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

The reader learns two important things here: first, that a *durwan* is never a woman, so Boori Ma’s position is actually exceptional. She has never been hired “officially” in that capacity but has taken on the role after years of service. Because she is never a “real” *durwan*, she is more easily dismissed at the end of the story. No character clearly explains the “circumstances” of the situation.

Second, the reader learns that Boori Ma has immense pride in her work. She is not doing the bare minimum in order to earn her keep but instead views her job as significant. Her humble building and its residents, who appear to appreciate her work in the beginning, are equal in her eyes to a wealthy

estate across town. As a refugee who arrived in Calcutta with almost nothing and as a worker of the lower caste, status does not have the same meaning to Boori Ma as it does to the residents later in the story.

☞ Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city.

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

This quote illustrates the gulf that divides Boori Ma from the other residents. Boori Ma is of another, lower class and follows the rules of the rigid class system surrounding her. Implied to be part of the untouchable caste, the societal rules are strict and extend to her body, dictating that she not even enter the apartment completely or sit on the furniture. She is welcome to stop by and play with the children, but that is where the hospitality ends.

The quote not only highlights the class differences between Boori Ma and the other residents but also the other spaces between them. Boori Ma watches them like “traffic,” an experience that is devoid of emotion and connection. Additionally, it’s akin to watching in a “foreign city,” which is an even bigger gulf. In these moments of respite and friendliness with her neighbors in which she might even be offered tea, she remains an outsider, lacking any real connection to the people for whom she works.

☞ To occupy the time, Boori Ma retired to the rooftop. She shuffled along the parapets, but her hips were sore from sleeping on newspapers.

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

This moment occurs right before Mr. Dalal returns home with news of his promotion and the two wash basins—and everything changes. This quote also captures Boori Ma's last moment of her routine life, when she has a small bit of control over her circumstances. Additionally, turning her quilts into rags for polishing points to Boori Ma's ultimate commitment to her duty as an unofficial *durwan*. As the reader has learned earlier, Boori Ma has immense pride in her role as the doorman and caretaker of the building, and the quilts are one of her few possessions. Now ruined for purposes of sleeping, they can at least improve the appearance of the building of the residents. However, she never does get around to polishing the banisters on account of all the visiting workers that descend shortly after. This quote symbolizes both the breaking down of her body after sleeping on newspapers but also the impending break in her routine and home life.

Among the wives, however, resentment quickly brewed.

Related Characters: Mrs. Dalal , Mr. Dalal

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 79

Explanation and Analysis

After the workers install Mr. Dalal's wash basin on the landing for all of the other residents to use, Mr. Chatterjee and Mr. Dalal agree to its added value, but this quote follows shortly after. It sets in motion the events that both improve the living conditions of the building but also result in Boori Ma's dismissal from the building.

The significance of the "wives" here calls attention to the gender divide of domestic life. Just as Mrs. Dalal responds to Mr. Dalal's promotion and purchase of the wash basins with indignation and frustration, the other wives also respond to a new luxury with resentment and jealousy. This commonality speaks to the daily, mounting tensions that the women endure at home. The story implies that the women have less control than the men and are expected to make a home without their own income. Their home is their only domain, the only place to exhibit power. In this case, it emerges as materialistic competitiveness following the Dalals' good turn of fortune.

Her mornings were long, her afternoons longer. She could not remember her last glass of tea. Thinking neither of her hardships nor of earlier times, she wondered when the Dalals would return with her new bedding.

Related Characters: Mrs. Dalal , Mr. Dalal, Boori Ma

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

This quote captures the ways in which Boori Ma's daily routine becomes upended once the residents begin making changes to the building. With all the additional workers coming in and out of the building, Boori Ma can no longer continue her work and is left feeling useless, since her identity and daily life revolves around her post as an unofficial *durwan*. She is not only devoid of work but also any additional kindness—like a cup of tea—from her neighbors. As the residents grow increasingly frenzied over updating their building, Boori Ma becomes increasingly isolated from all the people in her small circle.

The second part of the quote mentions that her only thought is of her new bedding—not the past, not her memories, only a good night's sleep. A lack of such a basic human need has only contributed to her sense of disorientation. She does not yearn for the friendly company of Mrs. Dalal—she merely wants what she is promised to help ease her nights.

It was there, while she was standing in the shopping arcade surveying jackfruits and persimmons, that she felt something tugging on the free end of her sari. When she looked, the rest of her life savings and her skeleton keys were gone.

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

With no bedding, little sleep, and little room to complete her work, Boori Ma is in physical pain and isolated from the other residents. Her new walks in the market are her only

respite from her disorienting lack of routine. In getting distracted by fruits she cannot afford, her keys and meager life savings disappear. Although she is a trusted worker who takes pride in her daily, mundane tasks, all that she has built over the years crumbles in a moment.

The verb "tugs" in this quote is significant: it does not state whether someone pulled the items from her sari or if they merely got caught or snagged on something and thus were lost. The true culprit is unidentified, which merely compounds the sadness of Boori Ma's fate following the theft of the communal wash basin. The truth once again remains vague, despite Boori Ma's later protests of innocence.

Though none of them spoke directly to Boori Ma, she replied, "Believe me, believe me. I did not inform the robbers."

Related Characters: Boori Ma (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Before she even speaks, the residents immediately suspect Boori Ma of having a hand in the theft of the wash basin. They speak above and around her, ignoring her protests. They appear to not even notice that the keys and her life savings have been lost, only that Boori Ma was not at her usual post and, therefore, must have informed the robbers and stepped away. Not a single person attempts to talk to her directly, making it seem like the residents aren't interested in pursuing genuine justice—just doling out blame on the most convenient person.

The structure of this quote emphasizes the residents' blind assumption of Boori Ma's fate, yet she attempts to reach them nonetheless. The power structure is completely one-sided, as it has been the entire story, but it is now in clear view. The resident dismiss her in this moment, both as a *durwan* but also as a fellow human. As an outsider, her perspective counts for nothing, even though she was the only one present when the keys were lost and thus the only person who can really speak to what happened.

“For years we have put up with your lies,” they retorted. “You expect us, now, to believe you.”

Related Characters: Boori Ma

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is presented as a collective response, as all of the building's residents respond to Boori Ma's pleas of innocence. The quote implies that the residents are all in agreement as they speak this line, meaning that she has no other allies in the building since Mrs. Dalal is away. It might have made no difference—one woman against the group would not be able to change Boori Ma's fate.

The quote also demonstrates the extent to which the residents have re-written the past in order to accomplish present goals. Earlier in the story, they Boori Ma's stories entertaining, unsure of their veracity but willing to listen. The wives even pass the ever-changing stories as manifestation of her grief. Yet here, when they need a scapegoat and an excuse to hire a real *durwan*, the residents easily remind themselves that they have done her a kindness in the past by "put[ting] up with" her stories. They use her questionable memory against her in the harshest way.

“Boori Ma's mouth is full of ashes. But that is nothing new. When is new is the face of this building. What a building like this needs is a real *durwan*.”

Related Characters: Mr. Chatterjee (speaker), Boori Ma

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

Mr. Chatterjee has the final word when it comes to Boori Ma's fate as an unofficial *durwan*. After presenting their desire to dismiss her, the other residents turn to Mr. Chatterjee for his opinion. The quote's significance is twofold: Mr. Chatterjee is looked upon as the resident intellectual, even though the narrator mentions that he has not opened a newspaper since 1947. His status, therefore,

is worthless and simply based on tradition. This moment highlights the absurdity of the residents' decision and their very rapid change of perspective toward Boori Ma.

Additionally, just before speaking these two sentences, Mr. Chatterjee surveys the building and the new alterations that have been made, rather than looking at Boori Ma. Her life, or what it may become, is meaningless in light of what may become of their status as residents of a new and improved structure. The value of the building—status in the eyes of the neighborhood—trumps any compassion he might feel toward a vulnerable woman.

☛ From the pile of belongings Boori Ma kept only her broom. “Believe me, believe me,” she said once more as her figure began to recede. She shook the free end of her sari, but nothing rattled.

Related Characters: Boori Ma (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 82

Explanation and Analysis

In these final two sentences in the story, the reader is left with the image of Boori Ma's slowly receding figure, left to fend for herself on streets of Calcutta. The final dialogue here returns to the first quote, as Boori Ma's voice of sorrow is the final sound. Additionally, she leaves with only a broom, just as she states earlier that she fled the crossed the border during Partition with only two bracelets on her wrist. She is forced to start over once again with very little to her name.

Boori Ma's final plea of “Believe me, believe me” also returns to an earlier sentence she often utters when the residents of the building try to poke holes in her pre-Partition stories: “Believe me, don't believe me.” Earlier in the story, she frequently brushes off their objections, hinting that the factual truth does not matter to her. Here, however, the phrase “Believe me, believe me” suggests that she is finally telling the real truth—that she did not have any part in the theft—and that it deeply matters to her whether or not the residents believe her, because her well-being depends on it. However, her pleas fall on deaf ears, and the powerful sound of her rattling keys, whether lost or stolen, is silent.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A REAL DURWAN

Boori Ma, “sweeper of the stairwell,” wakes up after another sleepless and uncomfortable night. After shaking the mites out of her quilts, she gets to work sweeping the stairs of her apartment building. At age 64, Boori Ma looks “almost as narrow from the front as she did from the side” from many years of hard living. Her voice is the only “three-dimensional” part of her—it’s “brittle with sorrows, as tarts as curds, and shrill enough to grate meat from a coconut.” Today, her knee is swelling from the humidity of monsoon season, which makes her work that much more difficult.

Boori Ma is a Bengali woman, a refugee who crossed the border during Partition years ago for Calcutta. As she cleans, she recounts what her life was like prior to Partition. She tells anyone who will listen that she had a husband and four daughters—though the “turmoil” separated them all from each other—as well as a comfortable two-story home, a wardrobe (*almari*) fashioned from rosewood, and several “coffer boxes, whose **skeleton keys** she still [wears], along with her life savings, tied to the free end of her sari.”

Boori Ma explains that she once lived a life of luxury—her yard was overflowing with guavas, dates, and blooming hibiscus blossoms. Although she crossed the border with “just two bracelets on [her] wrist,” there once was a time where her “feet touched nothing but marble.” She ends her proclamation by flippantly saying, “Believe me, don’t believe me, such comforts you cannot even dream them.” Although no one is completely sure if Boori Ma’s past life really was as luxurious as she claims—after all, she seems to double the size of her estate each time she talks about it—they know at least one thing is true about her: she is definitely a refugee, as her accent reveals as much.

Opening with the descriptor “sweeper of the stairwell,” immediately reduces Boori Ma to one identity and occupation. And although her physical description is brief and rushed, the description of her voice is powerful. After all, it is her voice that becomes her main identity as she recounts her past day after day. The subtle details of her voice, of sorrow and sharpness, introduce her as a complex, “three-dimensional” character who exists beyond physical appearance and station, even though society tries to pin her down as just one thing.



The lavishness that Boori Ma recounts when talking about her past life begins to raise the question of whether or not she’s telling the truth and if her memory can be trusted. The skeleton keys make the first appearance here, as she carries them around as a constant reminder of her past. The mention of Boori Ma’s skeleton keys and life savings fastened to the end of her sari also serves as a moment of foreshadowing, as both will feature importantly in the plot near the end of the story.



Boori Ma’s recitation of “Believe me, don’t believe me” crops up several times throughout the story in various forms. Here, it suggests that she doesn’t care if the residents believe the granular details of her memories, like the size of her estate. What she really seems to be trying to communicate is the notion that she’s lost a lot in her life in recent years. Meanwhile, the detail about Boori Ma’s accent positions her as the Other, as she’s set apart from the other residents.



The details of Boori Ma's recitations change daily. On some days, she insists that she crossed the East Bengal border on the back of a truck, nestled between sacks of hemp. On other days, though, she is adamant that she arrived in Calcutta on a bullock cart. Because of this, the children sometimes tease Boori Ma about the truth of her tales. When they ask her how she *really* came to Calcutta—on a truck or on a cart—she dismisses them breezily, asking, "Why demand specifics? [...] Believe me, don't believe me." Boori Ma "garbled facts. She contradicted herself. She embellished almost everything." Despite this, her stories are so compelling "that it was not so easy to dismiss her."

Mr. Dalal, one of the residents, wonders how a landowner could go from a life of luxury to a sad existence sweeping the stairs. Mr. Dalal works in the plumbing district for a wholesale distributor that sells tubes and pipes. Mr. Chatterjee, another resident, admits that Boori Ma's "mouth is full of ashes" but that her stories are harmless. She is, in his opinion, "a victim of changing times." The residents value his opinion highly, even though he hasn't left his apartment or even read a newspaper since Independence.

Some of the residents decide that Boori Ma must have once worked for a wealthy *zamindar*, and that's why she embellishes her past so dramatically. However, her stories "hurt no one," and everyone agrees that she is extremely entertaining. In exchange for sleeping on the floor of the building, Boori Ma keeps the place extremely clean. Plus, the residents generally appreciate Boori Ma standing between their building and the rest of the neighborhood.

The only item of worth in the entire building is Mrs. Misra's private telephone, but the residents are nonetheless glad to have Boori Ma standing guard. Plus, she's able to call a rickshaw at impressive speed, she's discerning about which vendors she lets in, and she scares away shady characters with just a few thumps of her broom. In many ways, she is a lot like a "real durwan," despite the fact that *durwans* are always men, not women. Boori Ma takes her duties seriously, just as if she were the doorkeeper at a fancy building in Jodhpur Park.

On this particular day, Boori Ma feels as if she's been bitten by mites and takes her quilts to the roof to air. There, she runs into Mrs. Dalal, a resident who "[has] a soft spot for Boori Ma." Boori Ma suggests that the mites must have wings, and that's why she can't see them in her bedding. After noting Boori Ma's cheap, dirty, and outdated sari, Mrs. Dalal reassures Boori Ma that there are no bite marks on her skin, assuring her, "you are imagining things." She suggests that Boori Ma must have a simple case of prickly heat.

The narrator admits that not everything Boori Ma says is true. However, the facts are "garbled," not entirely erased, and the details are "embellished," not changed on a fundamental level. The implication is that foundation of her stories is solid. The residents at this point appear to agree, acknowledging that Boori Ma and her stories can't be entirely "dismiss[ed]" as false.



Mr. Chatterjee's qualifications for resident intellectual are thin and even ridiculed here. However, his verdict that her stories aren't malicious or problematic is significant—later in the story, he will again proclaim that her "mouth is full of ashes," but the implication will be much different.



A zamindar is a wealthy landowner who leases out parcels of their land. Thus, the residents decide that Boori Ma was probably not a landowner herself—this is too implausible to them—but that she lived and worked as a tenant farmer on land that she and her family leased from a zamindar. Once again, though, it doesn't really matter to the residents whether or not her stories are true because they "hurt no one," and she's good at her job as a durwan.



The fact that Mrs. Misra's telephone is the only valuable in the whole building suggests that the residents are not well off, so Boori Ma's job as an unofficial durwan seems suitable for such an establishment. The idea that men, not women, are usually durwans also brings gender to the forefront of the story. As she was previously set apart as the Other because of her accent, now she is positioned as different because of her gender.



Once again, Boori Ma appears unreliable, insisting she has mite bites, when Mrs. Dalal sees no tangible evidence. It fits with Boori Ma's insistent story-telling about her past because the foundation of the story is true (that she feels pain on her skin), while the surrounding details are false (that the pain specifically comes from invisible, winged mites).



Boori Ma retorts that it is absolutely not prickly heat. She explains, "I used to keep a clean bed. Out linens were muslin. Believe me, don't believe me, our mosquito nets were as soft as silk. Such comforts, you cannot even dream them." Mrs. Dalal agrees that she "cannot dream them," sighing, "I live in two broken rooms, married to a man who sells toilet parts." Examining Boori Ma's ragged quilts, Mrs. Dalal promises to talk to Mr. Dalal about getting the woman new bedding.

Boori Ma and Mrs. Dalal's current positions are ones of resident and servant, and yet this moment demonstrates how Boori Ma's past widens the gulf between them. Mrs. Dalal sighs in defeat that she will never know luxury because of her husband's low-level job. As a woman, she has no ability to change their position and even must ask her husband in order to do something as seemingly minor as getting Boori Ma new quilts. This passage also establishes Mrs. Dalal as Boori Ma's ally, as she cares enough for Boori Ma to get new bedding for her, despite the fact that Mrs. Dalal's own life is difficult and her finances are implied to be tight.



Mrs. Dalal says she'll provide Boori Ma with powder for prickly heat, but Boori Ma is adamant that it's mites, not the heat, that's causing her so much discomfort: "Boori Ma preferred to think that what [...] what burned like peppers across her thinning scalp and skin, was of a less mundane origin."

The verb "preferred" here implies that Boori Ma makes her own version of the truth—she "prefer[s]" to tie the discomfort to mites rather than the heat, just as she "prefer[s]" her version of her life that she recounts to the other residents.



After she beats her quilts, Boori Ma returns to work. Shortly after, the monsoon rain begins, practically dissolving her quilts on the roof. As she cleans, she is comforted by her conversation with Mrs. Dalal. After a brief afternoon nap on a bed of newspaper, Boori Ma awakens and double checks that her life savings are still attached to her sari.

The loss of Boori Ma's quilts to nature is pitiful, as she owns very few items. The loss of her quilts means that she will sleep even less than before, as she now must resort to using newspaper. Her lifesavings reappear in the story once again, foreshadowing the events to come.



Boori Ma often enjoys some time with the neighbors in the afternoon, as is her plan this day. She is welcome in their homes; they sometimes offer her tea, and she plays with the children. However, because she understands that she cannot fully enter their homes and enjoy their hospitality, "she crouched, instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city." By this point in the day, she's less comfortable and "beginning to want some prickly heat powder after all."

The visits with the neighbors highlight the fact that Boori Ma is respected in the building. However, she knows she can't socialize with them as an equal, as the social, economic, regional gap between them is too large. She may be offered a cup of tea, but she is forced by societal expectations to "crouch." She can neither stand nor sit according to her position as a foreigner, an unprotected woman, and a laborer. Her life is, in fact, one of liminality. Meanwhile, her internal desire for prickly heat powder also returns to her version of the truth. She insisted earlier that the itchiness is due to mites, yet here, she confesses to herself that Mrs. Dalal might have been right.



Mrs. Dalal's husband, Mr. Dalal, returns from work with the news that he has been promoted to manager and has purchased two new **wash basins** to celebrate. Mrs. Dalal is unimpressed: "What are we supposed to do with two basins in a two-room flat? [...] Who ever heard of it? I still cook on kerosene. You refuse to apply for a phone. And I have yet to see the fridge you promised when we married. You expect two basins to make up for all that?" Their argument lasts through the evening, and everyone listens in. Boori Ma finishes her next round of sweeping in silence and goes to sleep on a pile of newspaper.

Mr. Dalal decides to install the second **basin** in the landing of the building. The residents are thrilled, since "for years they had all brushed their teeth with stored water poured from mugs." The workers spend all day installing it, "squatting" around the perimeter of the building on breaks. Mr. Dalal is pleased with his decision to put the basin in the landing, considering that "a sink in the stairwell is sure to impress visitors. Now that he was a company manager, who could say who would visit the building?" With all the comings and goings of the workers, Boori Ma is unable to get her work done and instead goes to the roof to tear her ruined quilts into strips so that she can polish the banister with them later.

When the basin is finally installed, Boori Ma laments that she once had bathwater scented with rose petals, adding, "Believe me, don't believe me." Admiring the basin, Mr. Chatterjee declares the basin "a sure sign of the changing times." The other residents quickly turn jealous, resentful, and competitive. They spread rumors about Mr. Dalal and Mrs. Dalal, claiming that they are already being irresponsible and showy with their newfound wealth, which only get worse when the Dalals leave on vacation. Mrs. Dalal has not yet given Boori Ma new bedding, but she reassures Boori Ma she will get some while on vacation.

With the Dalals out of the way for a while, the other wives begin plotting improvements to the building, too. Some pawn valuable items to raise the money. They sell wedding bracelets, silver bowls, and a sewing machine in exchange for a fresh coat of paint on the building and on the shutters, and a visit from the exterminator.

Mrs. Dalal's first emotion is not pleasure at her husband's promotion but exasperation at his gesture. It points toward many years of frustration that have boiled over for Mrs. Dalal. The Dalals have no shame in arguing loudly enough for the entire building to hear. In the midst of the excitement, they forgotten Boori Ma's new bedding, and she is left sleeping on newspaper once again.



Mr. Dalal's inner monologue here signifies the shift from complacency to activity. Now that he has a higher status in his employment, he wants his home to reflect as much. As the story is about to reveal, this attitude will be contagious for the other residents. Like Boori Ma, the laborers who install the basin "squat" as she "crouched." They are implied to be of the same caste, marginalized as workers in a divided society. That Boori Ma rips up her quilts is also significant, as she sacrifices her few belongings for the betterment of the building, suggesting that her life revolves around doing her job well.



The enjoyment of the new convenience is short-lived, as jealousy takes over. This moment highlights the tensions already present among the residents. Good fortune for all is instead twisted into resentment, as one small upgrade has transformed the residents into would-be materialistic social climbers. The departure of Mr. and Mrs. Dalal is significant, Mrs. Dalal seems to be Boori Ma's only true ally in the building.



Mr. Dalal's wash basins are a catalyst for change. The wives (significantly, not the "husbands" or "couples") exchange valuable or priceless items in order to create a materialistic change in the eyes of their neighbors. The story implies that they don't earn an income outside the home, so the wives' only avenue to material improvement is selling the few valuables they have accumulated. Status becomes more important than keepsakes.



With so many workers about, Boori Ma retreats to the roof, continuing to sleep on newspapers with long days of monsoon rain stretched in front of her. Mr. Dalal and Mrs. Dalal are yet to return, and in “thinking neither of her hardships nor of earlier times, she wondered when the Dalals would return with her new bedding.” With her newfound free time, she begins walking through the city streets to soothe her sore body. On the day Boori Ma walks the farthest, slowly beginning to spend small amounts of her life savings on treats along the way, she feels a tug on the end of her sari—the **skeleton keys** to the building and the remainder of her life savings are both gone.

Boori Ma's careful daily routine has been completely upended—no sweeping, no chats with Mrs. Dalal, no bedding, no neighborly visits. She is so exhausted from a lack of sleep that her only thought is of the new bedding. She has no other capacity to remember the past, only the relief that has been promised, and she is powerless to change her situation until the Dalals return. It's significant that when Boori Ma's keys and remaining money somehow disappear, she feels a pull on her sari—this suggests that someone stole the keys, but it's also possible that the free end of her sari unknotted itself and the keys fell off.



When Boori Ma returns to the building, the residents are waiting for her angrily, as “baleful cries rang up and down the stairwell.” The communal **wash basin** has been stolen while she was away, and some residents begin pointing their fingers at Boori Ma, claiming that she must have informed the robbers of its existence and location. They carry her up to the roof and even deposit her “on one side of the clothesline and started screaming from the other.”

Before she even returns, the residents are already convinced of Boori Ma's guilt. She immediately becomes the scapegoat, and her Otherness condemns her. This becomes physically manifested as she stands on the other side of the clothesline. Her private space now physically provides a border between “her” and “them.”



Boori Ma claims innocence, repeating, “Believe me, believe me,” but they've already decided her guilt. They claim she is a habitual liar and should no longer serve the building as their durwan, since the residents “have valuables,” and Mrs. Misra lives alone and has a telephone. Mr. Chatterjee gives the final verdict. After taking in the building's improved appearance, he speaks: “Boori Ma's mouth of full of ashes. But that is nothing new. What is new is the face of this building.” He declares that it is time to get a “real durwan.” The residents throw Boori Ma and her meager belongings down the stairs and into the alley. She leaves the building, with only her broom in hand, still uttering, “Believe me, believe me.”

The residents cite Mrs. Misra living alone with her telephone as one of the reasons why the building needs a “real durwan,” conveniently forgetting that she has lived alone with her telephone long before the flurry of improvements took place, and that Boori Ma was more than sufficient as a durwan. It's also significant that Boori Ma's usual phrase of “Believe me, don't believe me” switches to “Believe me, believe me,” as it suggests that she really is telling the truth—the full truth—about the theft. Nonetheless, the residents rewrite the past, or their past impression of Boori Ma, to make her dismissal more convenient. They don't even listen to her defense but rather warp the past of her embellished memories to justify their aims. They want to appear better in the eyes of others, and Boori Ma is collateral damage.





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