

Displacement and Dispossession of a woman in the short story of *Tadka Chai* from *Life in Lockdown COVID-19 Pandemic* – An Anthology of Short Stories compiled by Akshay Sinha

Ms. Nilima Mahadeo Ambad¹

*Research Scholar, Research Centre in English, BPHE Society's Ahmednagar College,
Ahilyanagar, (M.S.) India*

Dr. Satish Govind Saykar²

Research Guide, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, (M.S.) India

Abstract

The paper deals with the tragic period of the Covid-19 Pandemic where people suffered tremendously due to different parameters like financial crisis, health issues, social disconnection, and psychological anxiety. Men and women have equally undergone various challenges in their lives to overcome this period. Especially when it is about Indian woman, the social, traditional, psychological aspects have made her to face the challenges alone, not only at her working place but also at home. This made her lose her identity along with her self and made her displaced in her own life within the four walls of her home. The study depicts her struggle in her daily routine and finding herself at the dearth of her life.

Keywords: Displacement, Dispossession, Lockdown, pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lock down brought unforeseen changes to our lives and the way society is organised. The effect is at multiple levels and dimensions: healthcare, anxiety, friendships, intolerance, behaviour, education, work, and economy, soon and so forth. It affected the people in all over the countries with physical, mental, psychological, social and economic perspectives.

In such crucial period, the life affected was pen down by various authors through different forms of literature. One such form is short story that provides literature with open-ended interpretations and indicates a more complex view of reality and human behaviour at some point. The genre even has its unique feature of experimenting with prose writing style and form that authors still use

with classic literary devices such as point of view, imagery, foreshadowing, metaphor, diction or word choice, tone, and sentence structure to create a distinct atmosphere. At the same, the short story is a form which provides maximum messages through minimum use of words forming incidence.

Likewise, the story of *Tadka Chai* by Shalini Vineeth touches the readers with the practical life experiences of a woman protagonist. The story which is one of these segments in a book of *Life in Lockdown COVID-19 Pandemic-An Anthology of Short Stories* compiled by Akshay Sinha showcases various angles of her milieu that affect the character in the story.

The author Shalini Vineeth, based in Bangalore worked as an engineer for ten years and then quits her job in 2018 to embrace her

long-time passion for writing. Since then, she has published three books namely *Magic Square* (Novella), *Everyday People* (Short story collection), and a *Travel Guide for Hampi*. Most of her stories depict the dilemmas of an urban life. She has a keen interest in history and archaeology. As an avid traveller, she owns the travel website *Pick, Pack, Go!* She was born in Wayanad, a quaint hill station in Kerala. She finished the engineering from BITS Goa, and master's from IIT-Bangalore. Now she resides in Bangalore with her husband and two-year-old daughter, Tara.

The writer has depicted the lockdown effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on a middle-class working woman who is shown managing all the household chores along with her official work to keep the balance of her family as well as her professional life in the crucial period. The character whose name is not revealed tries to seek relief from anxiety, restlessness and loneliness in a cup of tea.

Great Indian writer Amrita Pritam has rightly said “*There are many stories which are not on paper, they are written in the bodies & minds of women*”

Shalini Vineeth has exclusively illustrated the protagonist's feeling along with her actions that is sensibly relatable. The portrayal of mindset can be envisaged thoroughly. The statement “*The tea followed her wherever she went*” seems to be exemplary since the character needs to begin the day with refreshing herself with a cup of tea; however, the routine chores also made her physically and mentally occupied, letting her not to sip the tea at ease. Hence the statement aptly expresses the displacement of the character for her “me time” with the tea. The sentence can be perceived as the symbol of how such a particular habit of

having tea can be thought or even sensed as a companion or aide that comforts her.

Though it becomes the silent companion of her while struggling with the household chores and the work from home duties for her office, she still gets disconnected with the companion due to the piles of work she has to manage. The routine is fixed and she needs to complete her tasks within the restricted time, but she is still not getting time to sip the cup of tea within the time. A woman who works to prove her

I've got the children to tend The clothes to mend The floor to mop (...)

*I got a clean up
thorough
ishut
Then see
about the
sick
And the
cotton
to pick
(Maya Angelou,
Woman
Work)*

Unlike Maya Angelou's poem Shalini Vineeth showcases the multiple responsibilities a woman in every corner of the world tries to fulfil. This is because a woman species is born to do the household chores with resilience as societal burden is placed naturally upon her. As her duties are unfinished, she is dissociating with herself in engaging herself in a heap of errands.

The story continues with the statement “*The world outside is uncharacteristically dark and silent*” represents her heart which is full of emotions and feelings but there is no one with

whom she can share it. She runs with the strikes of the clock. Every object described in this story symbolises her life in a way or other.

The character starts the day in the very early hour's i.e. from the dawn and ends the day at night. This means that when she wakes up, the day appears to be dark due to dawn and when she ends the day then night is dark. During the day time where there is light, she is busy with lot of chores & responsibilities that it's not possible to live the life. Instead, existing in life during the day becomes her necessity as a middle-class working woman. The more she is engaged, the less she is with herself. The more she is devoted to her family responsibilities, the less she is devoted to herself. As a mother, wife, daughter, employee, maid and many other roles women have long been thanklessly expected to devote their time and energy to others without taking anything for themselves.

The character also feels the overburdened mind when she sees the over-stuffed refrigerator. The vegetables, boiled potatoes, dough for parathas are the connotation for the piles of responsibilities she has planned for the day. As there are agendas in everyone's life especially when they wake up, they try recollecting the various tasks. Likewise, the character of the story extracts from her mind the agendas of the day-to-day routine that is to be fulfilled while sipping a cup of tea. The mind is preoccupied with the activities, so she leaves behind her tea companion and again gets dispossessed with herself.

She feels once that her body moves like a machine and her actions become mechanized due to the overstrain of work. 'She calculates' (pg.2) for the preparation of meal, but while

doing the kitchen work, she suddenly switches her attention to the laundry work. Too many tasks at a time are habitual occurrence for any woman, especially a working woman, when it is multitasking due to time constraint. The statement "*The huge heap of cabbage blocks her view of the tea in front of her*" (pg.2) is like her will to take the taste of life that is represented by her "*chai*" is blocked by the heap of cabbage representing daily chores or huge responsibilities and in those daily chores she is suddenly reminded of another pending task of laundry.

Her melancholy of life and routine dives again with the physical as well as psychological milieu. Though she is earning and capable of having domestic help, global environment of pandemic made her helpless and isolated. Alone she has to manage not only her home and office but also her psyche. "*She feels that washing machine is a true representation of herself - tired and overworked, trying to cater to everyone's needs during the lockdown*" (pg. 3). This statement makes her relate a washing machine with herself depicting the psyche in present disturbed state. The displacement from soul to body as a machine reflects the isolation of her mind with body.

People in pandemic have been affected tremendously not only financially, socially but also psychologically. Being at home people feel alone or isolated. Continuous household chores are the noise that does not allow her to sit quietly and take the taste of tea to rejuvenate her. It illustrates that she remains slave of the situations and is trailing behind the work. The subjugation of work has overpowered her solitude and made her deprive the freedom.

After some work when she realises

her tea in the cup is now not drinkable because it became cold. But when she prepares the masala for her aloo paratha, it receives a share of the spicy oil and ingredients like jeera, blasted chili, sizzled onion and spray of oil being very close to the gas stove, where the tea now becomes “*Tadka Chai*”. The working woman of the story is surviving due to all these ingredients and is not complaining about her pain to anyone as she wants to continue with the same. She gets emotional sometimes but the tea which is her silent companion for all her work is personified through the statement “*The tea softly invites her to rest for awhile*” and she replies “No, don’t!” adds the strong link of communication between an imaginary object and the human being. While she prepares fresh brew of tea for her family, the protagonist feels the observant and compassionate look of her “*Tadka Chai*” towards her for her exhausted and tired state. It can be considered as a support system for her and being a companion for her unspoken emotions.

The mortality of everything gets focused when she pours her silent companion i.e. her *Tadka Chai* into the sink and continues with her

routine by forgetting it is like soul is draining out of body which was truly a requirement for her living the life rather than existing in life. The mind which is displaced and dispossessed due to her overloaded routine work.

The story ends with the statement “*The rest of the world leisurely enjoys the lockdown, finding new hobbies, and reinventing themselves, the middle-class working women of India have no such luxury*”

Salini Vineeth has effectively presented the Indian working woman in this story who always sacrifices her comfort for the luxury of her family members. She wants to start her day with a cup of tea but her responsibilities in the lockdown routine never allow her to take a relax sip of a hot tea. She needs to wait for the sip of tea for a long time and the tea becomes cold; in the end she pours that cold tea into the sink. This action signifies the pressure, sense of responsibility and the sacrifice of her own comfort for the completion of her household chores.

Her conversations with non-living things in the house represent her displacement with her soul and dispossession with the quest of expression of feelings, along with tiredness and stressed mind.

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