

CODE SUJET: EHP5

SUJET JURY

SUJET CANDIDAT N°

The nature of her illness, which struck without warning, confined her world to the unpainted four-story building in which her only local family, an elder cousin and his wife, rented an apartment on the second floor. Liable to fall unconscious and enter, at any moment, into a shameless delirium, Bibi could be trusted neither to cross a street nor board a tram without supervision. Her daily occupation consisted of sitting in the storage room on the roof of our building, a space in which one could sit but not comfortably stand, featuring an adjoining latrine, a curtained entrance, one window without a grille, and shelves made from the panels of old doors. There, cross-legged on a square of jute, she recorded inventory for the cosmetics shop that her cousin Haldar owned and managed at the mouth of our courtyard. For her services, Bibi received no income but was given meals, provisions, and sufficient meters of cotton at every October holiday to replenish her wardrobe at an inexpensive tailor. At night she slept on a folding camp cot in the cousin's place downstairs.

In the mornings Bibi arrived in the storage room wearing cracked plastic slippers and a housecoat whose hem stopped some inches below the knee, a length we had not worn since we were fifteen. Her shins were hairless, and sprayed with a generous number of pallid freckles. She bemoaned her fate and challenged her stars as we hung our laundry or scrubbed scales from our fish. She was not pretty. Her upper lip was thin, her teeth too small. Her gums protruded when she spoke. "I ask you, is it fair for a girl to sit out her years, pass neglected through her prime, listing labels and prices without promise of a future?" Her voice was louder than necessary, as if she were speaking to a deaf person. "Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?"

Each day she unloaded her countless privations upon us, until it became unendurably apparent that Bibi wanted a man. She wanted to be spoken for, protected, placed on her path in life. Like the rest of us, she wanted to serve suppers, and scold servants, and set aside money in her *almari* to have her eyebrows threaded every three weeks at the Chinese beauty parlor. She pestered us for details of our own weddings: the jewels, the invitations, the scent of tuberose strung over the nuptial bed. When, at her insistence, we showed her our photo albums embossed with the designs of butterflies, she pored over the snapshots that chronicled the ceremony: butter poured in fires, garlands exchanged, vermilion-painted fish, trays of shells and silver coins. "An impressive number of guests," she would observe, stroking with her finger the misplaced faces that had surrounded us. "When it happens to me, you will all be present."

50 Anticipation began to plague her with such ferocity that the  
thought of a husband, on which all her hopes were pinned,  
threatened at times to send her into another attack. Amid  
tins of talc and boxes of bobby pins she would curl up on the  
floor of the storage room, speaking in non sequiturs. "I will  
55 never dip my feet in milk," she whimpered. "My face will never  
be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with  
turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a  
card."

Her soliloquies mawkish, her sentiments maudlin, malaise  
60 dripped like a fever from her pores. In her most embittered  
moments we wrapped her in shawls, washed her face from the  
cistern tap, and brought her glasses of yogurt and rosewater. In  
moments when she was less disconsolate, we encouraged her  
to accompany us to the tailor and replenish her blouses and  
65 petticoats, in part to provide her with a change of scenery, and  
in part because we thought it might increase whatever matri-  
monial prospects she had. "No man wants a woman who  
dresses like a dishwasher," we told her. "Do you want all that  
fabric of yours to go to the moths?" She sulked, pouted, pro-  
70 tested, and sighed. "Where do I go, who would I dress for?" she  
demanded. "Who takes me to the cinema, the zoo-garden,  
buys me lime soda and cashews? Admit it, are these concerns  
of mine? I will never be cured, never married."

But then a new treatment was prescribed for Bibi, the most  
75 outrageous of them all. One evening on her way to dinner, she  
collapsed on the third-floor landing, pounding her fists, kicking  
her feet, sweating buckets, lost to this world. Her moans ech-  
oed through the stairwell, and we rushed out of our apart-  
ments to calm her at once, bearing palm fans and sugar cubes,  
80 and tumblers of refrigerated water to pour on her head. Our  
children clung to the banisters and witnessed her paroxysm;  
our servants were sent to summon her cousin. It was ten  
minutes before Haldar emerged from his shop, impassive apart  
from the red in his face. He told us to stop fussing, and then  
85 with no efforts to repress his disdain he packed her into a  
rickshaw bound for the polyclinic. It was there, after perform-  
ing a series of blood tests, that the doctor in charge of Bibi's  
case, exasperated, concluded that a marriage would cure her.

News spread between our window bars, across our clothes-  
90 lines, and over the pigeon droppings that plastered the para-  
pets of our rooftops. By the next morning, three separate  
palmists had examined Bibi's hand and confirmed that there  
was, no doubt, evidence of an imminent union etched into her  
skin. Unsavory sorts murmured indelicacies at cutlet stands;  
95 grandmothers consulted almanacs to determine a propitious  
hour for the betrothal. For days afterward, as we walked our  
children to school, picked up our cleaning, stood in lines at  
the ration shop, we whispered. Apparently some activity was  
what the poor girl needed all along. For the first time we  
100 imagined the contours below her housecoat, and attempted to  
appraise the pleasures she could offer a man. For the first time  
we noted the clarity of her complexion, the length and lan-  
guor of her eyelashes, the undeniably elegant armature of her  
hands. "They say it's the only hope. A case of overexcitement.  
105 They say" — and here we paused, blushing — "relations will  
calm her blood."

Lahiri, Jhumpa, "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" in *The Interpreter of Maladies*, Flamingo, London, 1999. pp159-162.

I have dwelt so much on the difficulties which at present obstruct any real knowledge by men of the true nature of women, because in this as in so many other things “*opinio copiae inter maximas causas inopiae est;*” and there is little chance of reasonable thinking on the matter, while people flatter themselves that they perfectly  
5 understand a subject of which most men know absolutely nothing, and of which it is at present impossible that any man, or all men taken together, should have knowledge which can qualify them to lay down the law to women as to what is, or is not, their vocation. Happily, no such knowledge is necessary for any practical purpose connected with the position of women in relation to society and life. For,  
10 according to all the principles involved in modern society, the question rests with women themselves—to be decided by their own experience, and by the use of their own faculties. There are no means of finding what either one person or many can do, but by trying—and no means by which any one else can discover for them what it is for their happiness to do or leave undone.

15 One thing we may be certain of—that what is contrary to women’s nature to do, they never will be made to do by simply giving their nature free play. The anxiety of mankind to interfere in behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude. What women by nature cannot do, it is quite superfluous to forbid them from doing. What they can do, but  
20 not so well as the men who are their competitors, competition suffices to exclude them from; since nobody asks for protective duties and bounties in favour of women; it is only asked that the present bounties and protective duties in favour of men should be recalled. If women have a greater natural inclination for some things than for others, there is no need of laws or social inculcation to make the majority of them  
25 do the former in preference to the latter. Whatever women’s services are most wanted for, the free play of competition will hold out the strongest inducements to them to undertake. And, as the words imply, they are most wanted for the things for which they are most fit; by the apportionment of which to them, the collective faculties of the two sexes can be applied on the whole with the greatest sum of  
30 valuable result.

The general opinion of men is supposed to be, that the natural vocation of a woman is that of a wife and mother. I say, is supposed to be, because, judging from acts—from the whole of the present constitution of society—one might infer that their  
35 opinion was the direct contrary. They might be supposed to think that the alleged natural vocation of women was of all things the most repugnant to their nature; insomuch that if they are free to do anything else—if any other means of living, or occupation of their time and faculties, is open, which has any chance of appearing desirable to them—there will not be enough of them who will be willing to accept the condition said to be natural to them. If this is the real opinion of men in general,  
40 it would be well that it should be spoken out. I should like to hear somebody openly enunciating the doctrine (it is already implied in much that is written on the subject)—“It is necessary to society that women should marry and produce children. They will not do so unless they are compelled. Therefore it is necessary to compel them.” The merits of the case would then be clearly defined. It would be exactly that  
45 of the slaveholders of South Carolina and Louisiana. “It is necessary that cotton and

sugar should be grown. White men cannot produce them. Negroes will not, for any wages which we choose to give. *Ergo* they must be compelled." An illustration still closer to the point is that of impressment. Sailors must absolutely be had to defend the country. It often happens that they will not voluntarily enlist. Therefore there  
50 must be the power of forcing them. How often has this logic been used! and, but for one flaw in it, without doubt it would have been successful up to this day. But it is open to the retort—First pay the sailors the honest value of their labour. When you have made it as well worth their while to serve you, as to work for other employers, you will have no more difficulty than others have in obtaining their services. To this  
55 there is no logical answer except "I will not:" and as people are now not only ashamed, but are not desirous, to rob the labourer of his hire, impressment is no longer advocated. Those who attempt to force women into marriage by closing all other doors against them, lay themselves open to a similar retort. If they mean what they say, their opinion must evidently be, that men do not render the married  
60 condition so desirable to women, as to induce them to accept it for its own recommendations. It is not a sign of one's thinking the boon one offers very attractive, when one allows only Hobson's choice, "that or none." And here, I believe, is the clue to the feelings of those men, who have a real antipathy to the equal freedom of women. I believe they are afraid, not lest women should be  
65 unwilling to marry, for I do not think that any one in reality has that apprehension; but lest they should insist that marriage should be on equal conditions; lest all women of spirit and capacity should prefer doing almost anything else, not in their own eyes degrading, rather than marry, when marrying is giving themselves a master, and a master too of all their earthly possessions. And truly, if this  
70 consequence were necessarily incident to marriage, I think that the apprehension would be very well founded. I agree in thinking it probable that few women, capable of anything else, would, unless under an irresistible *entrainement*, rendering them for the time insensible to anything but itself, choose such a lot, when any other means were open to them of filling a conventionally honourable place in life: and if men are  
75 determined that the law of marriage shall be a law of despotism, they are quite right, in point of mere policy, in leaving to women only Hobson's choice. But, in that case, all that has been done in the modern world to relax the chain on the minds of women, has been a mistake. They never should have been allowed to receive a literary education. Women who read, much more women who write, are, in the existing  
80 constitution of things, a contradiction and a disturbing element: and it was wrong to bring women up with any acquirements but those of an odalisque, or of a domestic servant.



Margaret Thatcher with husband Denis, son Mark and daughter Carol,  
ca 1977

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newsttopics/themargaretthatcheryears/1895781/Margaret-Thatcher-The-housewife-with-power.html>