

FROM MOSAIC TO MELTING POT: FEMALE CHARACTERS IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DARKNESS*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee has received respectable attention from critics around the world as a 'voice' of the expatriate- immigrant sensibility. She has stayed in different places and has lived through various cultures, in her journey as a writer her creative sensibility has undergone many changes- a continuous quest from 'expatriation to immigration', as her concerns can be seen in the lives of South- Asian immigrants and problem of assimilation. Her writings during her stay in Canada present her interpretation and reaction of her experiences there because of which she started seeing herself as an expatriate. Whereas when she moves to America, it offers her recognition as an immigrant with a very strong sense of attachment and this experience reflects in her writings in US. People cross borders for various reasons and life reveals the diaspora settings in different ways. The character of diaspora is determined by the cultural interface of the conditions in the host country and the circumstances that bring about migration. Before moving further let's take a glance at the terms associated with expatriate sensibility.

Keywords: - immigrant, assimilation, expatriate etc....

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People cross borders for various reasons and life reveals the diaspora settings in different ways. The character of diaspora is determined by the cultural interface of the conditions in the host country and the circumstances that bring about migration. Before moving further let's take a glance at the terms associated with expatriate sensibility. An expatriate mainly emphasizes on the native country, culture and traditions whereas an immigrant lays thrust on the cultural life of the host country. An expatriate lives in status of the past as an "ex" whereas the immigrant feels happy about the present in the new land. Christine Gomez provides an accurate definition:

Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion which includes a wistful longing for the past, often symbolised by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the

host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as a refuse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country. (72)

A major concern for most of the first-generation immigrants who always try to maintain a balance between living “back home” and living in the ‘present’ is how to equipoise their dual association. On one hand is the need of a cultural identity, immovable and singular; and on the other hand, is the discarding of Indianess, as is done by Mukherjee:

Indianess is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world. Though the characters in these stories are, or were, ‘Indian’, I see most of these as stories of broken identities and discarded languages, and the will to bond oneself to a new community against the ever-present fear of failure and betrayal. (Introduction to Darkness 3)

In between these two states of Indianess lie various identities in the genres of short story, poetry, novel and memoir.

Canada, the country takes pride in being a cultural mosaic based on a belief that it has evolved and become stronger by allowing the cultural diversity of the immigrants to stay. Enriched with elements of different colour, shape and size held together on a frame with glue forming a mosaic. It therefore is a mix of various cultural, religious and ethnic groups that exist in a society where everyone can keep their cultural identity and simultaneously become a part. Canada as it stresses on the core set of values of an immigrant is the best example of mosaic; one can be of any culture or religion and still be considered as Canadian. Depicting a collective where different communities have their own faith, practices, ethnicities and traditions that form an integral part of a bigger whole.

The notion of melting pot whereas sees an amalgamation of all groups assimilated into one, a culture adopted by US which offers a contrast by telling the immigrant no matter

what they have been in the past, now when in America, they are expected to adopt and follow the ways of the Americans. A place where people from different countries, cultures, races and religions are always welcome with a hope of finding freedom, new opportunities and better ways of life for in US all heterogeneous things become homogenous. The culture of minorities “melts down” to the American culture and it becomes a symbol for immigrants’ assimilation to the native culture.

Over the centuries, the notion of ‘mosaic’ and ‘melting pot’ has assumed importance; it emerged in North America as a concept to put forth the relationship of immigration with respect to Canada and United States. The term mosaic gained form in the work of John Murray Gibbons by the name of Canadian Mosaic (1938) whereas the term melting pot emerged as a result of Israel Zangwill’s play The Melting Pot (1908). Both the terms have achieved historic value as they carry a belief and describe a national ideology. Therefore, for the situations in Canada it is called the ‘cultural mosaic’ and for America it is said to be the ‘melting pot’. It is thus much evident that both the nations have different attitude towards the immigrants. Where Canada does not want to do away with the immigrants’ cultural identity, American on the contrary expects the immigrant to become a part of their society.

Canada being hostile to Indians and offering no recognition to Mukherjee surfaces in most of her early works. Her husband Blaise’s creativity was acknowledged whereas her capability was ignored. It was a difficult time for her as a diaspora woman coming first to Canada and then America. She acknowledges that during the 70s there was a kind of bigotry against the Indian citizens. In an interview to Alison B. Carb, she mentions:

There was a pattern of discrimination. I was refused service in stores. I would have to board a bus last when I had been the first person on line. I was followed by detectives in department stores who assumed i was a shoplifter or treated like a prostitute in hotels. I was even physically roughed up in a Toronto subway station. I found myself constantly fighting battles against racial prejudice. (357)

There she felt herself to be a psychological expatriate clinging to her ethnic identity which became too much for her to handle, she resigned her full professorship and came to US. She mentions this as a movement to preserve her 'self'. In the same interview she says:

Being in the US was a tremendous relief after Canada. I suddenly felt freed to write the Thousands of stories inside my head. In the US I wasn't continuously forced to deal with my physical appearance. I could wear western clothes and blend in with people on a New York City Street. America, with its melting pot theory of immigration has a healthier attitude towards Indian immigrants than Canada. (357)

Mukherjee's first collection of short stories Darkness, 1985 brings forth the complex lives of the immigrants in America. The title brings to mind Conrad's Heart of Darkness which in a way also becomes apt, for the stories are dull, bleak and bring out violence at the heart of human affairs bringing forth the problem an immigrant faces in trying to adjust in new life. Racism in Canada, focusing on the natives of South Asia who crave for success and face cultural prejudices, problem of the outsider, language issues, cultural differences often become subject of the stories. In the Introduction to Darkness, she says:

In the years that I spent in Canada- 1966 to 1980- I discovered that the country is hostile to its citizens who had been born in hot, moist continents like Asia that the country proudly boasts of its opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation. The purely "Canadian" stories in this collection were difficult to write and even more painful to live through. They are uneasy stories about expatriation. (2)

Most of the stories were written in a span of 3 months in Georgia. Of her creativity Mukherjee opines, "suddenly everything is possible. Excluded worlds are opened, secretive characters reveal themselves. The writing self is somehow united with the universe" (1). Mukherjee's understanding of identity is revealed through her observation of the females around her. She feels the differences between the women in Canada who are continuously changing their image and then women in India who are taught to be submissive but also strong to take care of their family and in larger context of the society. She writes, "I was witnessing a non- American definition of women's liberation" (Days and Nights in Calcutta

23). In the book she deals with her feelings about women's state in India and the articulation of feminism that changes across cultures. In their venture, her husband Blaise is fascinated by her father where as "Mukherjee depicts her father on the periphery, focusing instead on her mother and the women around her" (Fields 329). In the epilogue to the work she confronts that by writing this "accidental autobiography" she 'completed the painful, risky journey from exile to settler to claimant' (Days and Nights in Calcutta 302).

The opening story of the collection "Angela", in first person, is about a refugee Bangladeshi orphan, adopted by Brandon family of Iowa. She was little, bony structured and scarred bodied when she came, but when the story opens, she is a healthy person taking care of her unmarried sister Delia Brandon, who is currently in coma. Miss Grimlund Delia's nurse offers her Christian belief saying, "who'll be taken and who 'll be saved". There's no telling is there?" (Darkness13) This brings back to Angela terrible memories from the orphanage. She remembers, "When I was six, soldiers with bayonets cut off my nipples". "They left you poor babies for dead but the lord saved you", Sister Stella had mentioned to her (10). She was a girl with special mission which she might relive someday.

I am Angela the Angel. Angela was Sister Stella's name for me. The name I was born with is lost to me; the past is lost to me. I must have seen a lot of wickedness when I was six, but I can't remember any of it. The rapes, the dogs chewing on dead bodies, the soldiers. Nothing. (13)

Fortune does take a turn and Angela lands up with a loving family where she is pursued by another immigrant Dr Vinny Menezies. She had been a victim of ill luck in the past but her life was not to go waste as she was saved from brutalities. In the story Christian notion of forgiveness is highlighted as to forgive is divine. To forgive, forget and start again is reflected through Angela; she has undergone all sorts of miseries having forgotten that, she is ready to live a new life of serving the needy. According to Florence D' Souza;

Angela is caught between traumatic memories of her ordeals in the tropics amidst mud and leeches, an awareness of the physical scars she bears and her eagerness to assimilate and not waste her life. (185)

The second story “The Lady from Lucknow” again in the first-person narrative begins with a story of Husseina, a Muslim girl in love with a Hindu boy, who is terribly beaten to death by her father. This incident takes place just before partition and within months after Nafeesa, the narrator’s family had moved to Rawalpindi. Nafeesa grows up to be a young and voluptuous woman married to Iqbal, an engineer in Atlanta. She plays the role of a traditional housewife and makes her husband comfortable. The story follows her extramarital affair with a 65-year-old man. She says, ‘It isn’t trouble that I want, though I do have a lover. He’s an older man... He comes to see me when Iqbal is away at high-tech conferences in sunny, remote resorts. (Darkness 25)

Nafeesa’s quest for identity becomes the theme of the story. As a small girl she had seen the consequences of love and love-punishment met to poor Husseina. She goes against her religion as she is unable to repress her desires. She exerts herself saying:

Wives who want to be found out will be found out. Indiscretions are deliberate. The woman caught in mid-shame is a woman who wants to get out. The rest of us carry on. James flatters me in defatigably; he makes me feel beautiful, exotic, responsive. I am a creature he has immunized of contamination. When he is with me, the world seems a happy enough place. (25)

Climax comes when they are discovered in bed by James’ wife, Kate who rather than falling apart looks through Nafeesa as if she were a temporary entertainment. ‘I was just another involvement of a white man, something that “men do” and then come to their senses while the memsahibs drink gin and tonic and fan their faces’ (33). She sheds her fears and shame after being humiliated by Kate. As per Islam, sexual intimacy out of wed lock is a crime, Nafeesa has therefore committed a crime but as far as American culture goes it is no crime it is common and one’s personal desire. Critic Amanda Fields opines:

Like many of the women in Mukherjee’s fiction, Nafeesa must experience the pain of acculturation before she can experience change. Nafeesa is one of the many characters in Darkness who struggle with the awareness that they are culturally

adrift; accorded a meaningful identity on their own, as risky and painful a process as that may be. (331)

“A Father” another story, is about Bhowmick family from Bihar but settled in Detroit. It presents the upheavals they go through while adapting to the American way of life. The wife and daughter get assimilated and embrace the new culture while the husband feels distressed. He cannot uproot himself from his roots and carries with him the cultural baggage. Mrs. Bhowmick wanted America, nothing less” (Darkness 69) and coming to America too was her idea. She works for an insurance company, has her own credit card. ‘She was a woman of wild, progressive ideas- she’d called them her “American ideas” (68).

The story remarks for its images especially the image of Goddess Kali- patron of the family, goddess of wrath and vengeance. Mr. Bhowmick invokes her at all times even in Detroit for he is superstitious to a great degree. There is a clash of culture in the family as he tries to hold on to his culture whereas others have different views. The father daughter relation is strained because of the generation gap and different cultural influences. The news of his 26-year-old, electrical engineer Babli being pregnant through artificial insemination rages him. For Babli is free minded and wants to have a baby but in a fit of extreme anger Mr. Bhowmick strikes her stomach with a rolling pin and his wife calls the police. His reaction itself is an example of the rebellion of the east against the west. As observed by Sudha Pandya, “this is subtle depiction of the interactions, adjustment and sometimes conflict between two cultures and often between two generations of immigrants. The crisis out of these develops swiftly” (68).

Another story “Hindu” from the same collection is a first-person narrative by Leela, Bengali Brahmin married to Derek, a Canadian who is deeply interested in the Indian culture and she is a fluid identity. Leela meets Maharaja Patwant Sing in New York two years after her splitting with Derek. She works with a publishing house and is called an ‘Administrative Assistant’. She says:

In the two years I have tried to treat the city not as an island of dark immigrants but as a vast sea in which new Americans like myself could disappear and resurface at will. I did not avoid Indians, but without Derek's urging for me to be proud of my heritage, I did not seek them out... I had married a white man and was now separated, and there our friendship hit rock. I was a curiosity, a novel and daring element in the community; everyone knew my name. (Darkness136-137)

One thing that bothers her is in New York and Toronto people confuse Hindi with Hindu i.e. the language with the religion. Leela begins to see language as a sort of caste system, though she gets complemented for knowing a hard language, still she cannot leave her culture as it is very deeply ingrained in her. She says, "no matter how passionately we link bodies with our new countries, we never escape the early days" (139).

Critic Toril Moi states, "since patriarchy has always tried to silence and repress women and women's experience, rendering them visible is clearly an important anti patriarchal strategy" (207). She is conscious that she would be a sort of attraction at dinner parties for she has divorced her white husband. She would be looked upon as someone who has completely assimilated herself with the new country. She has broken away from her past and is on her new and western accent she says, "I speak Hindu. No matter what language I speak it will come out slightly foreign, no matter how perfectly I mouth it. There's a whole world of us now, speaking Hindu" (Darkness 140).

In "Visitors", Mukherjee presents Vinita beautiful wife of Sailen Kumar, a mannered and good-looking man working in Manhattan. Before his marriage, Sailen had bought Bloomingdale furniture, courted linen for bed and bath and gleaming kitchen appliances to please his bride. Going to America brought an excitement in Vinita's life; she knew it all along that after marriage she will have to leave Calcutta. She feels happy about everything that is around her, a different sort of happiness something which does not come from the ease of using modern conveniences but the new changes. 'Happiness, expressiveness, bad temper all these states seem valuable and exciting to her' (Darkness 163). Though at times she finds

it hard to believe that she has been gifted this life, for she feels she does not deserve enough. Neither has she done anything exceptional nor has she made any brave choices still she is being rewarded.

Vinita mentions about her experiences in the new land and many times she gets amazed by the fast pace of the American life. 'Everyone acknowledges a connection between merit and reward. Everyone looks busy (163). Vinita expected that married life would change her "overnight she would become mature, complex, fascinating: a wife, instead of a daughter. Thoughts of change did not frighten her" (163). She knew life in America and its rules were different from those at homeland. "She considers fear of newness self-indulgence, quite unworthy of someone who has wanted all along to exchange her native world for an alien one. The slightest possibility of disruption please her" (164).

One day Rajiv another immigrant who is infatuated to her shows up on the pretense of inviting her to a dance recital. She is unsure whether to invite him or not as her husband is away. In India, she would feel uncomfortable, but this is America. 'Here one has to size up the situation and make up one's own rules. Or is it, here that one has to seize the situation (167). She is little hesitant, steps back and gives it a thought also she does not want to offend Rajiv by going against the American customs. She has heard other immigrant women saying though they have minted money in America but they have not as yet become Americans. They have tried to remain simple and deshi. 'Vinita wants to remain deshi too, but being deshi and letting in this good-looking young man- might lead to disproportionate disaster' (168).

Finally, she lets him in and offers to prepare tea, an obvious gesture of an Indian hostess and does not call her husband to talk about Rajiv's coming. Once inside the apartment Rajiv approaches her with an uneven gait and confesses of his fondness. On hearing his mind Vinita is not as shocked as she should have been rather, she worries. "The mad passions of a maladjusted failed American make her shudder" (174). He lunges at her, she resists; she had assumed him to be just another American. He on the contrary is

convinced that she too feels something special for him else she would not have entertained him. Amanda Fields opines, 'Rajiv has done all he can to blend in American culture, is experiencing a sense of nostalgia for the traditions of India and he sees Vinita as the symbol of everything he now yearns for. (331)

After the visitor departs, Vinita bathe, dresses up, cooks a six-course dinner for her husband and his friends and behaves like a perfect host. It is obvious that the early afternoon incident is sure to change her. A change that is impending for, "she is ecstatic; she serves the men and manipulates them with her youth and her beauty and her unmaskable charm. She has no idea that she is on the verge of hysteria. She has no idea" (176). In the story Vinita tries to break the cultural and traditional taboo. Mitali R Pati comments:

The conflict in the social and cultural codes of the east and the west, the old and the new shows the hopelessly binary nature of all human desire. For the diasporic Indian, love symbolizes the anarchy of the self. (68)

'Darkness' is her transitional work as it reflects her thoughts and experiences about Canada and US. She ponders over her tough time in Canada and cherishes her experiences in America. Similar emotion is projected in her characters who want to assimilate in the US, keeping their past and culture in tack. Many critics refer to it as a rich exploration of homelessness and loss of identity. Critic Amanda Fields is of the opinion that 'Darkness confronts both the conflicts arising from cultural adaptation and the hold that the past has on those who attempt such adaptation. Many of the characters in these stories risk being excessively nostalgic about the past or succumbing to the label of victimization in the present' (329-330).

Most of Mukherjee's stories comprise of movements, most likely across national and ethnic boundaries. Of her characters she says they have all shed past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again. Her immigrants are determined to take America as their home. Mukherjee too sees herself as an American writer influenced and inspired by the melting pot culture. According to her there

are people who are born to be Americans and she is one amongst them, whether the Americans consider her or not.

Mukherjee recreates their world- more often than not relegates to marginal status by mainstream North America-throbbing, exuberant, and dynamic with the energy and passions of “aliens” determined to survive, succeed, and ultimately, belong. (Liew Geok-Leong 498)

Talking of her works on South Asian immigration experience especially of Canada and North America is painful. Racism is disturbing in itself, where of one of the suggested reading of the story collection *Darkness* can also be a reference to racial discrimination; a darkness of mind, darkness towards the colour of skin of another person. Her works set in Canada are bitter than those set in the United States especially that deal with racism.

Mukherjee’s US stories may be intended to be kinder and gentler than her Canadian ones, but she is aware that America is “violent”, mindlessly macho, conformist, lawless... No dark-skinned person has the right to feel comfortable inside American history. Yet I do. And she prefers American’s “melting pot”, girded by its “human rights laws”, to Canada’s discrete “mosaic”. (C L Chua 55)

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