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Immigrant Women in the Selected Works of Bharati Mukherjee: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract:

In her first novel, Bharati Mukherjee concerned with examining her homeland from an exile's perspective by the prospects ahead of them. But the year spent in Calcutta marks a turning point in Mukherjee's life in the sense that at the end of it she realizes that henceforth she would have to view herself "more as an immigrant than as an exile." For Mukherjee the writer this realization she had uprooted herself from India irrevocable meant a decisive alternation in her angle of vision: from now on she knew she could no longer think of herself as an Indian woman writer living in self-imposed exile in Canada. Instead, she would have to become an artificer of expatriation, someone concerned to record in her fiction immigrant lives and examine immigrant dreams and nightmares. Her second non-fictional works is *The Sorrow and the Terror: the Haunting legacy of the Air India-Tragedy* (1987). She draws the portraits of the 329 victims who died in the Air India plane crash in Ireland in June 1985, caused by the 1985 Sikh Terrorists; she examines the horror and latent racism exposed by the 1985 airline crash that killed hundreds of Canadian citizens, most of them who were of Indian descent.

The women protagonists of her short stories, quite a few of them being her own self portraits, she unravels the trauma and exacerbations which are an expatriate's *fait accompli*. These stories have been collected in two volumes, *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middle and Other Stories* (1988). Love, desire, and romance as experienced by immigrant men and women from the Indian subcontinent in the New World appear as a recurring theme in Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness and The Middleman and Other Stories*.

Keywords: immigrant, exile, uprooted an artificer of expatriation, Indian descent, the trauma and exacerbations, racial discrimination.

Introduction

In Bharati Mukherjee's first collection of stories *Darkness* (1985) we encounter a writer who is entirely different from that of the preceding works. *Darkness* is a collection of twelve stories that unfold the fates of those who have suffered among other things, racial discrimination in Canada. In Mukherjee's *Darkness* many women immigrants are wives who accompany their husbands overseas and have say in whatever happens.

Darkness raises question about human dignity, true value of diversity, tension between assimilation and preservation of cultures and the sanctity of citizenship. In Bharati

Mukherjee's stories, each group of Immigrants coming to America's shores has experienced long-term difficulties in preserving an old culture and forging a new one. It seems that if some people meet they require the exoticism of ethnic identity, while the other people demands complete abandonment and total assimilation. These mutually exclusive forces threaten an individual sense of self. Vinita had expected that married life in a new country with no relatives around should change her. She realizes that rules in America are different from those at home (India). An Indian wife would never allow any stranger in her house when her husband is away. She lets Rajiv Khanna come in and to take liberty with her. She does not feel like calling her husband. Her 'deshi' attitude will not let her loose to enjoy the company of that good-looking young man. After her visitor departs, Vinita puts on a purple Silk Sari, cooks for her husband and the friends he brings home without warning her a six-course dinner and ecstatically "serves the men and manipulates them with her beauty and youth and her unmark able charm. In this story, Vinita try to break the cultural and traditional taboos.

Bharati Mukherjee's other collection of short stories, the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) marks an advance over her previous collection(Darkness) in that its scope is broader, vision more perceptive and language more Americanised. It portrays the experiences of immigrants from Europe, the Caribbean, and other parts of Asia as well as India in the USA, in *Darkness* Mukherjee drew her characters from many sub continental classes and religions. Mukherjee's *The Middleman and Other Stories*, (1990) emphasize 'the reality of transplantation and psychological metamorphosis' (Aciman, 1999:70) 'that occurs when immigrants from various socio-ethnic and economic backgrounds interact with mainstream America in all its permutations and learn to negotiate their way 'between two modes of knowledge', (Mukherjee, 1990: 189) much in the tradition of early American pioneers and settlers. In *The Middleman*, she goes even further, gathering protagonists from all over the globe sometime she leaves out the Indians together.

The Middleman is about the experience of eleven people who have deliberately chosen to make America their new home not because of some political unrest upsetting their lives in their native lands, but out of lure for a better life, they have drifted themselves into a situation. Thus, the book does not focus exclusively on the Indian experience but details the lives of other immigrants- Hispanics, Italians and Sri Lankans as well. These characters from different backgrounds are forced to make their individual cultures take a back seat as they are busy absorbing the American milieu. Every now and then the native flavour peeps through this special American cover. Besides adjustment syndrome, the baser sides of American life, its license of violence take a strong grip over these immigrants, leaving them in a mess. The basic theme of all these stories therefore becomes the struggle that the unfortunate immigrants have to encounter and the anguish they have to undergo in the process of adjusting themselves and earning a livelihood.

The Middleman and Other Stories reveal a new world in our midst, a world created by the transformation of the United States by new faces from all over the world, from 'nothing places' as Bharati Mukherjee puts it. They portray the immigrants in all their richness and variety reflected in American eyes, equally varied with fear, low suspicion or pure

astonishment. The collection is about the straddling of two cultures, straining hard to reach a point of convergence.

The fictional writing of Bharati Mukherjee comprising *Darkness and Middleman* composed in the phase of Transitioncentre in the gripping dilemma of the protagonists who relentlessly try to overcome the native nostalgia. Quite a few of these characters behave and conduct themselves like immigrants much to the embarrassment of those who are in the process of acculturation. Anticipating the characters in her short stories, Mukherjee decides that she is an immigrant, not an exile. India, she discovers that to be a woman “was to be a powerless victim whose only escape was through self-inflicted wounds.” Her terrible revelation paves the way for her to establish her identity as a writer. Her trysts with the great English, Russian, and Bengali writers and her own ability to write make her different and destine her to follow a path distinct from the pattern of life of the Ballygunge girls.

Mukherjee explores other ramifications of cultural confrontation in her fourth novel *The Holder of the World* (1993). It is also a tale about dislocation and transformation arising when two cultures come into contact with each other. This novel “has a wide canvas that sweeps across continents and centuries, cultures and religions. Immigration, exile, alienation and foreign lands have always been the colour of Mukherjee’s palate and with *The Holder of the World*, she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite possibility and eternal time.” Here we witness an unlikely and intriguing meeting of two worlds, the puritan 17th and early 18th century American world trying to come to terms with the Mughal view of Indian life. *The Holder of the World* is about the lives of two women Hannah Easton and Beigh Masters. This novel is quest narrative. It is a quest for sexual awakening, liberation and self-actualisation.

A ‘translated’ immigrant is one who has gone through a series of transformations while he/she is exposed to a wide range of experiences in an alien land. Hannah Easton, the protagonist of *The Holder of the World* emerges from Brookfield, a puritan outpost in Massachusetts Bay colony. She becomes Hannah Fitch under the care of her foster parents. On marrying Gabriel Legge, she becomes Hannah Legge. When she falls in love with Raja Jadav Singh of Devgad, she becomes Salem Bibi. Ultimately she ends up as the priceless possession of Aurangzeb, ‘The Holder of the World.’ ‘Translation’ takes place not only in Hannah but also in others like Bhagmati and Beigh Masters, the narrator. They serve as a means of bringing about a contrast between Hannah and Bhagmati (contrast in the sense, ‘translation’ works in reverse) and a parallel between Hannah and Beigh Masters. As such the term ‘translation’ implies linguistic connotation. But in the narrative it gains religious, cultural and racial connotations as well. The term ‘translation’ has also been used to refer to displacement through adoption and marriage.

The Holder of the World is a significant work in Mukherjee’s oeuvre. The prime reason is, as FakhrulAlam contends, Mukherjee has tried to convince the older Americans that their destinies are not distinct from that of the new immigrants because of their historical connection with South Asia. In this novel Mukherjee has played with history and

imagination. It is clear that Mukherjee does not want *The Holder of the World* to be a traditional historical novel.

Mukherjee's fifth novel *Leave It to Me* appeared in 1997. This work continues the theme of immigration and in a way; it completes the trilogy beginning with *Jasmine*. Reviewing it in *The Hindu* Shalini Gupta writes:

In her latest novel, "Leave It to Me," about hitting the hippie-trail in post-hippie America, Mukherjee views life from the outside. Behind plastic, unauthenticated facades, the reality crumbles into a Karma-Cola as tacky as "cosmic glue."

The protagonist is a Eurasian orphan, Debbie Devi who is adopted by an upstate New York family of Italian origin. Born in India and raised as an adopted child, Devi Dee travels through America to find her bio-mom. By the time she has arrived in San Francisco and taken up with band of aging ex-hippies and a psychotic Vietnam Vet, her identity crisis looms large. It leads her to track down her bio-parents in Laxmipur, Devigaon, India, and the orphanage where she was raised- the Gray Sisters- "SoeursGrises"- Sore Grease- in Mount Abu. She learns from Fred, her hired detective, that her mother was the hippie follower of a sex-age guru, and her father the founder of the ashram, serial killer Romeo hawk/Haque. The offspring of this unlikely liaison, Devi Dee – presumed missing or dead – is saved by nuns and shipped abroad to America, where she is raised as the adopted child of the DiMartino family. Twenty-three years later, having graduated from Suny, Albany, she sets out to seek her bio-mom in off-beat California.

Who but a foundling has the moral right to seize not just a city, but a neighbourhood, and fashion a block or two of it into home? When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything.

Conclusion

The above statement quoted from the novel makes the predicament of the protagonist crystal-clear. Again here Mukherjee deals with the reality of 'Time – Travel.' An individual grappling with different culture around the globe to find his real identity. ShaliniGubta observes:

A Kaleidoscopic wheel of a book, "Leave It to Me" reveals the scars of beat generation, whose legacy to its survivors is as dangerous as shifting continental plates. Mukherjee shuttles between time and space zones to create a dichotomy "as wise the San Andreas fault." The novel's sex and violence rip from the grandstands to centre-stage and the maelstrom engulfs all.

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