Memoir as Dialogue: A Study of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*

Sarfaraz Nawaz  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Shibli National College  
Azamgarh

*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, a collaborative work, is an account of the experiences of the writers-Bharati Mukherjee and her Canadian husband Clark Blaise-of the time they spent together in India. The interesting thing about the book is the individual records that they kept in the journal having decided to write separately and without consultation with each other. Thus it ended up as a very unconventional memoir with the respective points of view of the two authors. This paper makes an attempt to study the book through Bakhtin’s idea of ‘dialogue’ which he considers a prerequisite for novel. The application of this theoretical framework helps one explore certain realities about India with fresh perspectives as encountered by Bharati Mukherjee who comes back to India after a long time to revive her ties with her homeland and her husband who engages with them as a foreigner. The individual sections of the book written by the duo open up a dialogue and expose the text to meaningful interpretation.

*Days and Nights in Calcutta* is a memoir that Bharati Mukherjee and her Canadian husband Clark Blaise collaborated on, giving their day to day account of Calcutta during 1973. Bharati as she visits Calcutta after a gap of fourteen years, having spent a considerable length of time in Canada with her husband Clark Blaise, socialises with her childhood friends, especially women who attended the same school with her, with a hope to revive her relationship with the land of her birth and upbringing. Blaise, though an outsider, in the privileged position of Bharati’s husband which accords him affection and respect from her family members, is able to have a peep into the cultural of India from close quarters.

*Days and Nights* makes a departure from the way traditional life histories and personal accounts are written. By making it a joint effort and dividing the job of jotting down their observations on Indian culture and tradition separately and to finally put them together in a book form, the husband and wife have given the memoir an inquisitive edge. They did not consult each other while they wrote their individual sections but the way both of them respond to the realities of life in India, their observations and comments seem to interact and have a dialogue. We can safely call it a collaborative autobiography:

Collaborative autobiographies challenge the fundamental paradigm of the unified self of traditional autobiography, as well as the concept of monologic representation. Texts that present a dialogue between two voices—two positions—radically alter not only the idea of individual self-representation, but the autobiographical process itself. (Davis 276)

Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogue’ and ‘polyphony’ corroborates the strategy adopted in such life writings where the interaction of voices produces meaning. The single authorial controlling voice is replaced with the play of multiple voices and this elasticity helps one uncover and explore meaning from different perspectives. This way text connects with the social reality of the world in which it is produced in a better way. In his famous essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’ Bakhtin posits:
The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogised heteroglossia, anonymous and social as language, but simultaneously concrete, filled with specific content and accented as an individual accent. (278)

With the two different positions of Bharati and Blaise that of the insider and the outsider the entire account becomes very engaging opening the memoir to fresh perspectives and interpretations. The encounter with the Indian reality that Bharati and Blaise deal with in their respective ways opens up a dialogue between two viewpoints. Their observation and analysis of the same situation from different angles provides the reader with the critical insight with which they can peel off the layers of reality in order to have deeper understanding.

The one year stay in India and encounter with Bombay and Calcutta—the two very different cities—affects the husband and the wife in different ways but leaves both of them with the same puzzling question that Blaise desperately asks, ‘If I want to understand India, where do I look? (52)’ albeit in case of Mukherjee ‘India’ could be replaced with ‘myself’ as she is baffled trying to reintegrate herself with her city wondering if it is possible to do so. She asks herself how far her Canadian citizenship, her marriage with a Canadian author and her American accent has affected the relationship with her homeland. She tries to locate herself in India as does Blaise though in a different way. Blaise finds India and its culture exotic while Bharati has turned exotic to India in a sense. She realises that she can no longer easily merge with the ethos that defines being an Indian. The twenty years that she had been away from her country have erased much and she cannot re-write the old memories afresh, nor will the circumstances and realities of life in a ‘changed’ Calcutta will let her do even if she wills so.

I was leading two lives that year; set against each other, they suggested a painless but mocking harmony. In Ballygunge I was the dutiful relative who paid Sunday morning visits to the family, ate rice and curried delicacies with her fingers, and sat on the edge of a bed gossiping with aunts or listening to the Bournevita Quiz on All-India Radio. But in downtown Calcutta, especially on Park Street or Chowringee, I was the Indian memsahib with a white escort to be lewdly stared at, or to be whispered good day to by elevator-boy-pimps. (239)

Blaise is at a loss to understand the way different sections of the Indian society have received the Western notion of development and progress in the given political scenario and the two sides of the picture that he always confronts—one of complacent upper middle class and the other of the struggling under class with no means or resources to survive and draw the benefits of a democracy. This disparity shocks him and rouses him to empathise with the lot of sufferers. As Bharati’s husband he is also witness to the upper-middle class life of the ‘elite’ who live in their own world of luxury and indulgence. Bharati’s many friends are the wives of successful rich businessmen and bigwigs of the society. They have separated themselves from the realities on the streets and dark corners which relate the pathetic tale of penury and plight and however they try to close their eyes, these glares in the face. Contradictions unsettle Blaise as he tries to read the ‘texture’ of Indian life in the city and suburbs:

India is poor and fragile, but it is also rich and robust; the problems have always been the unequal distribution of wealth and the disparities between
urban and village economies. It must be understood that India has the largest middle class in the world. (xii)

The two worlds that exist in India and shock the sensibilities of Blaise, cannot fail to evoke some response from Bharati but her observation is tinged with irony and a bitterness directed towards the class of people which is living a protected and secure life in its safe zone indifferent to the miserable lot which constitutes one dimension of the Indian reality:

Out there beyond our walled vision is a reality that disgusts and confounds the intellect, and a populace that is too illiterate, too hungry, too brutish, to be gently manipulated. Or, just as confounding, a populace too gentle to be brushtishly commanded. The odds against survival for an individual are enormous, and rewards, at best, are uncertain. (187)

Blaise is fascinated with the market places and bazaars in the suburbs brimming with people and a whole world of commodity on display in the open. The space on either side of the road is occupied. Stalls encroach upon the pavements and pedestrians have to move through them. Many vendors just spread their stuff on the ground to sell. One could witness a throbbing and pulsating Indian life in such a hustle bustle. The full on activity and participation of people in buying and selling of things brings Blaise to the conclusion that in India, ‘Commerce is community, community is commerce’ as ‘it is not solely greed; it is a natural part of middle class self-expression’ (23). But for Bharati the ‘Indian bazaar’ is also a place where she could come across swindlers and cheats and hence Blaise is asked to be on his guard and not to go shopping alone.

Blaise’s emotions range from pity to anger to irritation as he undergoes a variety of experiences confronting the realities around, sometimes through his encounter with them and many often as a silent spectator. The slow pace Indian life, the taken for granted attitude of people, their indifference to law and order, the racial discrimination, the gender biases, and political corruption all go through his lens of observation. But his is not a scathing criticism of India despite the fact that the notion of western superiority surreptitiously creeps in. Compelled by his emotions, many often, he would feel like going out of his way to bring about a change but bafflement would take over his eagerness to lend a helping hand. Contrary to this we find the strong community sense the way the upper-middle class women, as Bharati recounts, run a charity organization and make sustained efforts to provide free medicine to the leprosy victims in Mother Teresa’s Care-Home by personally participating in the physical exercise to preparing the powder and paste.

Bharati grapples with the question as to what extent the Western notion of feminism can help or has helped the Indian women in their given context. With unflinching reliance on faith and religion as governing forces in their lives coupled with the patriarchal set up of the family, Indian women have a very unstable position in the household. Even with materially successful and well off husbands enjoying very lucrative positions in the business industry, the joint family system, most of the time forces them to be at the receiving end and most often lose their voice. There are many among the young generation who cannot take this lying down and they have to blame the sacred texts and the religious myths which have caused their lot to suffer. According to them the image of an ideal wife associated with Sita and Savitri has done them much harm. The level of sacrifice and surrender that defines these two figures has set down a parameter for the womenfolk to prove their worth and merit as suitable wives capable of discharging their household duties with a sense of service and devotion and often unquestioningly:
Sita is an exemplary figure. The lesson is clear, uncomplicated: The wife’s role is one of self-abnegation. Sita’s loyalty is tested by the blandishments of the evil King Ravana, by the ignorance and cynicism of the subjects of Ayodhya, and by the unimaginative nature of Rama’s devotion to his people. But she never hesitates or questions. In this context, to ask why Sita should be made to suffer for Rama’s failure to protect her from abductors is to ask an irrelevant question. (233)

With the change in lifestyle and the social status accorded to women in the educated and liberal circles allowing them freedom to participate with men in myriad walks of life, a clash is perceptible. Many women that Bharati meets and talks with, share their plight how despite the apparent freedom and privilege they enjoy, the inside story is altogether different. Behind the curtain the same old game of patriarchal domination is at play. Meena, a young Marwari wife from an educated family but married into a conservative family confides in Mukherjee and shares her plight with her but not in open words. She is not allowed to read books, discouraged from taking an exam and couldn’t enjoy onion and garlic without smuggling it in to her room. There are many woes she would just suggest and expect Bharati to imagine and give voice through her fiction.

India is not free from racism and caste discrimination. Back home Bharati witnesses an even which disturbs and shocks her much although to her friends it is just fun. After a party as Bharati and her friends return home late in the night, on the way they stop at Nizam’s, a restaurant behind the New Market in a Muslim area, to enjoy kebabs. Anil first sports with a mad woman ‘pugli’ asking her to walk back and forth and terrifies a Muslim rickshaw-puller who was sleeping on the side-walk by posing to be an officer and asking for his permit. The whole episode is hilarious to the rest of the group, but Bharati considers it played on herself. Subject to open racial discrimination in Canada, she can easily identify with the fear of the hapless Muslim rickshaw puller:

I knew I ought to get out of the car and tell the rickshaw puller to ask Anil for his credentials. Because the rickshaw puller near Nizam’s was suddenly not just a Muslim resident of a Calcutta slum, but he was also me, a timid, brown naturalised citizen in a white man’s country that was growing increasingly hostile to “colored” immigrants. (250).

Blaise also narrates the incident and finishes his account with the description of the beggar who approaches Anil with his alm book asking for help. The way he is humiliated and made subject to communal hatred exposes the sinister face of racial prejudice and religious fanaticism that even highly educated people have not been able to get over:

A beggar with an alm book comes up to the window of the car as Anil finishes his food. He looks it over, then up at the beaming face of the man. “Urdu? You’re giving me a book in Urdu? Take it back. There is a country-why don’t you step across the border? It’s spelled P-A-K”(148)

The 1995 edition of Days and Nights Blaise has an introduction and two epilogues by Blaise and Bharati each. As they look back on their days and nights in Calcutta they have to come up with some more observations and insights. While Bharati returns to reassure herself of the decision to leave India and settle in a new country, she is now convinced she cannot build home out of memory as she says:
In writing this accidental autobiography, I completed the painful, risky journey from exile to settler and claimant. I could finally acknowledge to myself that not only was it no longer possible for me to go back to India to live, but that I did not want to. (302)

As for Blaise, as an observer in India but back home in Canada forced to leave his country and settle in America because of the racial discriminations that his wife had to suffer, he cannot free himself from a sense of nostalgia that Bharati claimed to have overcome:

I read this book now with the grim amusement and with chagrin at my own misdirected apocalyptic expectation. While I confidently projected the collapse of a whole subcontinent, I failed to see the collapse of the only world—my fragile and constructed Canadian identity—...that had fed my sense of purpose and lent me the confident perspective on something larger than my own childhood and adolescence. (xiii)

Thus, the two narrative voices continuously at play in the text engage in a dialogue and make the memoir read more like a novel than a personal account of real incidents which the authors encounter. The dialogic framework serves to enhance the appeal of the memoir by converting the single-thought discourse into a plurality of consciousness where the author can no longer monopolise the power to mean.

Works Cited:

