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A Study on the Social Issues Raised In the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract – One of the ways in which Mukherjee negotiates a new cultural identity for her women characters is by undermining the fixity with which these cultural narratives construct the subjectivity of the Indian woman. This process of interrogation is carried out primarily through her dismantling of the binary construction of social space for women as private and public or pure and polluted. Mukherjee explores the sociopolitical issues that determine this position on American identity through the migration narrative of its title character. Several well-known scholars find what they interpret as Mukherjee's celebration of assimilation and adoption of Western feminist values problematic, arguing that she idealizes the United States at the expense of her homeland.

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INTRODUCTION

In her first novel, The Tiger's Daughter (1971), Mukherjee uses the return to India of her nostalgic and 'homesick' Bengali Brahmin heroine as the context for undermining national myths of origins and foundations. In other words, the migrant's return 'to recover her roots' and the stability of her cultural identity as an Indian is not equated uncritically with an unexamined sense of what being 'Indian' means.

Instead, Mukherjee uses the migrant's moment of return to elaborate a much more complex and mediated understanding of national and cultural identity.

Mukherjee's novel further captures the chief resonances of Bhabha's argument by staging the migrant's return at a particularly visible intersection of history. The anarchy and chaos unleashed by the Naxalite rebellion disrupts the nation's temporal and cultural coherence by bringing to the fore the differences between ruler and ruled, minorities and majorities, empowered and disempowered, past and present.

More specifically, Mukherjee deploys the minority discourse that this movement represents to contest the appeal to 'origins' that authorize and legitimize dominant identities by claiming authenticity and unity. In this case, the hegemonic upper-class, Bengali Brahmin identity that Tara upholds is challenged by the diverse discourses and different kinds of address and knowledges that the Naxalite uprising uncovers within the nation space In relation to this, it must be emphasized that it is through the ambivalent spaces of Calcutta city that the narrative of the nation is rewritten. Thus, Tara is confronted by a multiplicity of Calcutta that confound any notion of the existence of a single or unchanging India. These multiple narratives of Calcutta are criss-crossed by various temporal and spatial narratives on the basis of the ethnic, religious, caste and class differences in the city. Indeed, it is a Calcutta 'too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one.

First, there is the Calcutta of the once plush and fashionable but now decaying Catelli-Continental Hotel, a disturbing obsolescence of British culture which towers over the stench and decay of busy Chowringhee Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. Once the 'navel of the universe', when Calcutta was the imperial city of British India and also its centre of commerce and political power, the Catelli is now a symbol of Calcutta's decline; its 'entrance is small, almost shabby', its 'walls and woodwork are patterned with mold and rust', the 'sidewalks along the hotel front are painted with obscenities and political slogans'. On them 'a colony of beggars' jostle for space with 'shrivelled women' and vendors selling their wares. Frequented in the past by people in positions of power and influence who would come together and talk, it is now the haunt of the Calcutta elite, people without passion and conviction, who come to take 'their daily ritual of express or tea while flicking through old issues of The New Yorker. Then, there is the capitalist Calcutta of moral bankruptcy evoked by Tara's coterie of upper-caste, upper class Bengali friends -- Sanjay, Pronob, Reena and Nilima -- which disdains the vulgarity and insurgence of the working class while lamenting the loss of an earlier Calcutta, 'one they longed to return to, more stable, less bitter'. Juxtaposed with this is the revolutionary Calcutta of class equality espoused by the Marxist

vision of the Naxalite movement. And there is also the 'Third World' Calcutta of economic underdevelopment, poverty, disease and overpopulation that is the target of the American visitor Antonia Whitehead's zealous prescriptions of 'democratization' and socio-economic reform. There is also the agricultural and feudal Calcutta symbolised by Pachapara, the old Bengal of order and stability represented by Tara's great-grandfather, the zamindar Hari Lal Banerjee. And then there is the graceful and stately Calcutta, representative of the high culture associated with the Bengal renaissance past, which is now both mourned and kept alive by the elegiac poetry and nostalgia of Joyonto Roy Chowdhury, a once wealthy tea-magnate whose failing fortunes is another metaphor for Calcutta's own crumbling social order.

Through him, Tara is exposed to another, tubercular, Calcutta symbolised by the bustees of Tollygunge with their squatters, beggars, lepers and 'open dustbins, warm and dark where car casses were sometimes discarded. There is also the Calcutta of industry and progress symbolised by the new township of Nayapur which is associated with the rising prominence of a new class of Marwari businessmen represented by Tuntunwalla, who have accumulated their riches in contrast to the old wealth of the Bengali Zamindars and businessmen like Tara's father, the 'Bengal Tiger'.

The text thus constructs the Indian nation not as a simplistic and polarized space, but as a configuration of diverse spatial and temporal determinants. In fact, Mukherjee's fictional technique to fracture the space of the nation into its multiple spatio-temporal indicators can be traced to her espousal of what she calls the 'Mughal aesthetic', named after the style of the Mughal miniature painting, which she describes as a cultural form that is crammed with narratives and sub-narratives,taut with detail and dramatic function, with its insistence that everything happens simultaneously, 'bound only by shape and colour'. Central to Mukherjee's embrace of the Mughal aesthetic is its ability to bring into sharper focus the time-space continuum of the novel in order to problematize the linear and unified narrative of national culture and identity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Christine Gomez, Mukherjee's mention of the article 'The World According to Hsu' by Kenneth J. Hsu in this story is only to propagate the idea that, "There is perhaps a longing for the world according to Hsu, a one world free from cultural collisions, dilemmas and separation". Therefore, the very title of the story suggests a desire for a world free of racism and cultural conflicts, where everyone can feel secure and free.

The other story by Mukherjee that foregrounds the expatriate experience of Doctor Miss Supariwala is "Isolated Incidents". These incidents are viewed through a native Canadian, Ann Vane, whose job is to file complaints from immigrants against problems related to Human Rights. These problems are considered by the native Canadians to be some 'isolated incidents' not needing much emphasis. This story is another evidence of Mukherjee's grievances against the racist set up in Canada.

Doctor Miss Supariwala is a stern, stocky woman of forty-three, with doctorates from Western Ontario and Bombay, who claimed to have been passed over at job interviews in favour of lesser candidates. She was a Canadian citizen, she'd published numerous articles, she'd won a few research grants. No one could fault her promptness, her discipline, her preparedness.

But certain racist Canadian interviewers object saying that, "students would not relate easily to her, some might complain of her accent, her methodological stiffness, her lack of humor".

Therefore, Miss Supariwala's rejection in favour of lesser candidates is a clear evidence of cultural marginalization. Ann Vane is surprised that "in spite of everything, the Supariwalas wanted to stay on". This shows that despite all hardships, expatriates continue to cling to the alienated identity in despair with only a dim hope of attaining a multicultural identity one day.

Through these discriminatory incidents of Canada, Mukherjee has put forth her own expatriate experiences. She states that: Such a complex position induces diasporic women to write their lives. Their literature is generally charged with intense anxiety of dislocation and adaptation. In their endeavour of self-expression, they make fictions out of their lives and as a result, their novels become autobiographical.

Therefore, Mukherjee is one such displaced author whose works are mostly an attempt at self-definition. Women are the worst victims of cultural collisions, as they fall prey not only to cultural marginalization but also to multiple patriarchies. But in the postmodern context, the ideas of nationalism and patriotism have altered significantly and in place of the 'homing desire', a possibility of 'fluid identities' is created. As a result, women break out of the patriarchal limits, and reject any 'hyphenation' of identity to celebrate a liberated identity. For them, crossing the border is a mark of liberation from all oppressions.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Mukherjee's interrogations and reconstructions of the 'stable' cultural narratives of home are launched primarily through the figure of the migrant woman. My intention in the following section is to examine how Mukherjee's attempt to construct a viable cultural and national narrative is carried out through a reworking of the ideological structures and imperatives that shape the construction of the migrant woman's identity in America.

The Indian woman, as Partha Chatterjeeh as demonstratedin his important essay, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', bears an immense ideological load in Indian nationalist discourse. Chatterjee identifies the dual discourse of the material and the spiritual, the world and the home as the strategy aimed at resolving the binary opposition between tradition and modernity put into place by the workings of colonialism: The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms 'world' and 'home' corresponded, had acquired ... a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture.... the world, imitation of an adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to the annihilation of one's very identity.

The opposition between outer and inner, world and home, as Chatterjee argues, was hierarchized by Indian nationalist discourse in such a way that home soon came to be seen as the space of inner, 'pure, Indian culture; accommodations to the West in the outer or material sphere were represented as superficial changes that did not compromise the 'essential' inner culture. The inner sanctum of home thus came to be regarded as the crucial marker of the purity of Indian culture and tradition which had at all costs to be guarded against the threat of contamination posed by modernization. Since home has historically been gendered feminine, the place of the woman in securing this 'true' nationalist Indian culture has been crucial.

Accordingly, within the workings of this binary, the Indian woman, who represents the inner sanctum, the pure space, had to be protected from the contamination of Westernization. It is she, through her feminine purity, who is the representative of the continuing traditions of the community.

In addition to the cultural construction of the woman in nineteenth-century Indian nationalist discourse, there are numerous other cultural narratives of the Indian past which establish chastity as a dominant cultural trope for ideal womanhood: the most famous of the legendary 'good wives' in Hindu culture and tradition being Sita of the Ramayana and Savitri of the Puranas. In all these cases, the rhetoric of purity highlights women as crucial symbols of communal identity and as bearers of tradition and culture.

Eschewing such static representations and understanding of cultural meaning and experience, Mukherjee demonstrates in her fictions that the act of migration allows her characters to discover alternative meanings of home. Her Indian women, especially the wives, for instance, find out that the private and public are never absolutely distinct categories, however much it is in the interests of their husbands or their community to insist on this structure of strict and binary opposition. Since the discourse of culture operates within a system that defines purity in terms of the woman's lack of Westernization, the community makes sure that the woman's contact with American society is kept to the minimum.

Thus, Wife highlights the tragedy that can result when the migrant is prevented from effectively engaging in new inscriptions of self by a hegemonic view of home as fixed and immutable, and hence of national and cultural identities as fixed and irrevocable. Such an essentialized view of culture, as Mukherjee posits in Wife, forecloses any possibility of a negotiation of one's identity.

The novel demonstrates that the act of simply transposing one cultural narrative onto another geographical and cultural location without leaving space for interaction and negotiation with the new culture -- in this case, the American culture – is unhealthy, even unnatural.

Jasmine is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on physical and psychological levels. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experiences of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself.

The story is told from the first-person point of view by the female protagonist, who undergoes multiple identity transformations in her quest for self-empowerment and happiness. Mukherjee uses the cinematic techniques of flashback and cross-cutting to fuse Jasmine's past and present. The novel is steeped in violence.

The book begins with the twenty-four-year-old narrator, Jane Ripplemeyer, living as the common-law wife of Bud Ripplemeyer, a fifty-four-year-old invalid banker in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa. Through flashbacks, she recalls her story from childhood in Hasnapur, a village in Jullundhar District, Punjab, India, where she was born as Jyoti, the unwanted fifth daughter in a poor, displaced Hindu family. When she was seven, an astrologer predicted that she was doomed to widowhood and exile. Determined to fight her destiny, Jyoti begins to empower herself through learning English, for "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world."

Moreover, these critics contend that Jasmine's development relies on American and European models of personal success, thereby reinforcing notions of the ever-victimized "third world" woman rescued by liberal Western values. In her article

"Reading and Writing the South Asian Diaspora: Feminism and Nationalism in North America," Inderpal.

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