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REVIEW ARTICLE

A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SELECTED FICTION

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A Postcolonial Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Selected Fiction

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INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, to an upper-middle class Hindu Brahmin family in Calcutta, India. The second of three daughters of Sudhir Lal, a chemist, and Bina (Banerjee) Mukherjee, she lived with 40 or 50 relatives until the age of eight. Born into an extraordinarily close-knit and intelligent family, Mukherjee and her sisters were always given ample academic opportunities, and thus have all pursued academic endeavors in their careers and have had the opportunity to receive excellent schooling. In 1947, her father was given a job in England and he brought his family to live there until 1951, which gave Mukherjee an opportunity to develop and perfect her English language skills.

Bharati Mukherjee's, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* are the works that successfully interpret Bakhtinian concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, carnival etc. They draw our attention to the women protagonists who live lives of multiple identities. During their gradual progression from the 'periphery' to the 'centre' or from one identity to another they enter into a dialogic relation with the 'other', and also depict the 'carnavalesque' features of subverting the authority. Jasmine (in *Jasmine*) and Tara Chatterjee (in *Desirable Daughters*) are the two characters who not only undergo changes in the process of hybridization but also highlight the subversive and liberationist connotations of Bakhtin's concept of 'carnival', or the 'carnavalesque'. Each of these texts concentrates upon a figure on the boundary, at the "cultural border zones that are always in motion, not frozen for inspection" (Rosaldo).

Each narrative constructs 'a painful process' of arrival and departure, flight and return, rupture and explosion, decentring and delinking, rape and disfigurement, the closing of tongues and the loosening of tongues, reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. The transplantation is never final but always in process, the gently ripping sound is continuous; and the tearing away of roots never finally completed.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a narrative that concentrates on the 'diasporic space', which can also be identified as a 'no-man's land'. It is like a 'bridge' thrown between the 'earlier self', when the character has not crossed the boundaries, and the 'latter self', when the protagonist has left home and has transplanted herself to a new place and environment. The word 'bridge' is used by Bakhtin as a metaphor for the operation of dialogism: "A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge belongs to me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is a territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor" (Bakhtin and Volosinov). Jasmine, the protagonist of this fiction, seems to be standing on one such 'bridge' during her journey from Punjab to California, via Florida, New York and Iowa leading her through various transformations –Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. This re-identification, resulting from the cross-cultural exchange or the 'dialogization' of the First World and the Third World voices, presents the problematics of belonging.

Jyoti, an innocent girl of Village Hasanpur in Punjab, marries Prakash Vih and commences the ceaseless journey, which begins with her transformation into Jasmine. Prakash secures admission in some American Institute of Technology. Unfortunately, on the eve of his departure, he is killed by the Khalsa Lions (rebels demanding a separate land for the Sikhs—called Khalistan). After his death, Jasmine smuggles herself into America with the strong urge of burning herself a 'Sati' on the campus of that very Engineering College in which Prakash has taken admission. An innocent village girl, marrying an educated city boy, then smuggling herself into America and burning herself a Sati are all carnivalesque features, where Jasmine subverts the patriarchal as well as the cultural authority. Her encounter with Half-Face, the sailor who abducted, brutalized and raped her during her passage from the Third World to the First World; and her consequent killing of him instills a new faith and courage in her—a desire to live. Samir Dayal writes: "In killing Half

Face, she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation". The death of her husband by a bomb, her killing of the sea captain, her banker partner (Bud) becoming wheelchair bound after being shot—are symbolic of the fragmentation, violation and distortion of the patriarchal body. Hence, Bakhtinian carnival in this novel is interpreted and appropriated as a feature that reverses and suppresses the prevailing social and patriarchal hierarchies.

The 'addressivity' and 'speaking across' of central and peripheral cultural voices, leads to transplantation and metamorphosis of the displaced subject, which if viewed from diasporic angle is never final but always in the process of endless search for location. This condition of belonging simultaneously, mentally and experientially, to a diversity of cultures is visible in the character of Jasmine.

Tara in *Desirable Daughters* may not have undergone any alteration of names, yet we witness multiple portraiture of her persona undergoing changes in succeeding phases of hybridization—from Tara Bhattacharjee to Tara Chatterjee and then simply Tara (a single mother, living in San Francisco with her adolescent son Rabi). Through Tara's character, Mukherjee has presented the dialogic nature of the diasporic experience that does not highlight the native/alien hierarchy, rather brings out the cross-cultural interaction and its consequent impact, particularly, on women psyche.

Tara considers her migration to America, a way to lead a liberated life away from the shackles of traditional Indian ethos and patriarchal codes that keep the women on the margins. Her move to America liberates her from clinging to her nativity. Five years of marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee convince her that he is a traditional Indian at home. Her Americanization coaxes her to divorce Bish as she refuses to be an appendage of her husband as expected of a traditional Indian wife.

Mukherjee considers immigration to be "a two-way metamorphosis" (Holt) and in this work, she has successfully portrayed that, in a multicultural scenario, it is not just the past that collides with and influences the present, but the present also colours and illuminates the past. At the time of cultural clash, the 'self' and the 'other' are 'co-present' in all of us which raises the possibility of dialogue between cultures at an individual or internal level. This dialogue further leads to the co-existence of multiple identities within one personality. Tara is one such displaced identity who believes that co-existence of cultures and the 'roots search' is an attempt to understand the stranger as well as the "stranger within ourselves" (Kristeva). Tara's fluid identity is a strategy of survival in a multicultural and marginalized space where "They assume multi-vocal narratives which incorporate multiple voices of the cultural web and offer a polyvocal polity which metamorphoses into a kind of cultural dialogics" (Nayak K).

Both the works of Mukherjee discussed in this chapter exhibit the cultural dialogics leading to hybrid identities of Jasmine and Tara Chatterjee. Such identities, as defined by Stuart Hall, are "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'". This statement of Hall depicts the 'unfinalized' nature of 'self' discussed by Bakhtin in the context of language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christine Gomez,(1986) : 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" ("From Expatriation to Immigration"). 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.

Considering V. S. Naipaul (2000) : to be a model, Mukherjee has based some of the stories on the expatriate experience: Like V. S. Naipaul, in whom I imagined a model, I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation. Like Naipaul, I used a mordant and self-protective irony in describing my character's pain. Irony promised both detachment from and superiority over, those well-bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong. (Mukherjee, *Darkness*)

Dialogism, according to Lynne Pearce, has infiltrated Western intellectual thought at many different levels. Not only is it an area of literary theory and textual practice which cuts across other approaches and positionings (structuralism/post structuralism/marxism/ feminism/ psychoanalysis) but it has also been espoused as a new model of academic debate and, in its most grandiose aspect, presented itself as a new epistemology.

Keeping this observation in mind, it may be concluded that, in this study Bakhtin's concept of 'dialogics' is appropriated to refer to the negotiation between cultures leading to "diasporaization" (a term used by Stuart Hall), which further culminates in hyphenation and hybridization.

The second work of Mukherjee viewed through the cross-cultural lens is her short-stories collection *Darkness*, which is a store of multiple expatriate and immigrant experiences of culturally sandwiched women. Through the women protagonists of her short stories, some of them being her own portraits, she unravels the multicultural and assimilatory experiences of the migrants.

Story describing the painful experiences of expatriates is "**The World According to Hsu**" in which Ratna is caught up with the fear of moving to Toronto with her Canadian husband Graeme. She thinks, "In Toronto, she was not Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London,

a Paki. And for Pakis, Toronto was hell" ("The World According to Hsu"). Though, Ratna's expatriation is only mental and not experienced, yet it leaves a deep scar on her psyche. The racist experiences of other Indians in Toronto continue to haunt the thoughts of Ratna. Even before settling in Toronto, the fear of discrimination is so deeply embedded in her mind that she is willing to live as a foreigner on that small island off the coast of Africa rather than live as an 'outsider' in Toronto for the rest of her life. She wants to continue to guard her ethnic identity rather than allowing the alien culture to smother it. She enjoys the multicultural set up of that island: "feeling for the moment at home in that collection of Indians and Europeans babbling in English and remembered dialects. No matter where she lived, she would never feel so at home again" ("The World According to Hsu"). Ratna's fears are similar to Mukherjee's own experiences that resulted in her departure from Canada.

NEED OF STUDY - NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE:

"FLUIDIC IDENTITY & CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SELECTED FICTION"

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* is a true depiction of Caruth's assumption that, "Trauma is deeply tied to our own historical realities" (Caruth). The novel delineates Dimple Dasgupta's migration from Calcutta to New York, and her consequent schizophrenic tendencies resulting from trauma of memory. Dimple's nostalgic yearnings and reveries turn the eccentricity, confusion and violence inside out and she ends up murdering her husband in cold blood.

Bharati Mukherjee's collection of short stories *Darkness* deals with the expatriate experiences of diasporic individuals. These stories collide with Mukherjee's own experiences of exclusion in Canada. "Until Atlanta and it could have been anywhere in America—I had thought of myself, in spite of a white husband and two assimilated sons, as an expatriate. In my fiction, and in my Canadian experience, 'immigrants' were lost souls, put upon and pathetic" (Mukherjee, *Darkness*). This chapter is a humble attempt at portraying the influence that these 'lost souls' have on the native female subjects.

Bharati Mukherjee's other collection of short stories *The Middleman and Other Stories* deals with the characters who are middlemen or interpreters between two cultures. Hence, the stories portray the interdependence of both the diasporic and the host subjects. Christine Gomez remarks: "The theme of these is immigration and the reciprocal effect of the immigrants and American life on each other". The two stories in this collection that explore the transformation

in host subjects are "Fathering" and "The Management of Grief". These stories represent the existential predicament of all the diasporic as well as the dissociated hosts leading to their invisibility and anonymity in the wake of cultural fusion. Mukherjee comments in an interview: "The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up" (Carb).

"The Management of Grief" is a story about the consequences of a plane crash. An Air India Jet flying to Canada, explodes off the West Coast of Ireland. Mukherjee remarkably describes the impact of the disaster on the victims' relatives in Canada and how the Irish officials try to empathize with these isolated Indian families. Mrs. Bhavie is one such affected Indian who has lost her husband and two sons in the air crash. She is surprised at the reaction of the Irish authorities. "The Irish are not shy, they rush to me and give me hugs and some are crying. I cannot imagine reactions like that on the streets in Toronto. Just strangers and I am touched. Some carry flowers with them and give them to any Indian they see" ("The Management of Grief"). Thus these Irish officials symbolize the hosts who are receptive and offer a multi-cultural vision. Their sympathetic attitude towards the Indians is an attempt at negating the binaries of self and other.

The next work of Mukherjee under emphasis in this research is *Jasmine*. Though the novel mainly unravels the series of adventures which the heroine, Jasmine, undergoes during her journey from Punjab to California, but at every step of her transformation she confronts the various host subjects who act as significant stimulants in her attempts at assimilation. Helena Grice writes: "Mukherjee's characters do not simply claim America, they transform it". Hence the various native characters that come in contact with Jasmine, not only help Jasmine redefine her 'self' but themselves get claimed in the process of assimilation.

Another work of Mukherjee that explores the theme of dislocation in a bicultural set up is *The Holder of the World*. But this transformation in identity, arising out of cultural collision, is stretched over temporal and spatial boundaries. This novel too 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 palette and with *The Holder of the World*, she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite possibility and eternal time.

It is a story about two white women, one, Hannah Easton, living in the seventeenth century and the other, Beigh Masters, living in the present. Through this work, Mukherjee presents: the difference between the Old and the New Worlds, represented by

America and India, as a clash of value systems, a confrontation between an austere, stark society and a culture in which nothing is more important than the celebration of beauty. Mukherjee skillfully compares the seventeenth century Indian and seventeenth century Puritan American society with the present 20th century American society, and shows how the host subject (Beigh) of the new world develops an affinity with the diasporic subjects (Rebecca and Hannah Easton) of the old world. "Like Rebecca and Hannah, I have a lover. One who would seem alien to my family. A lover scornful of our habits, of self-effacement and reasonableness, of our naive or desperate clinging to an imagined community".

METHODOLOGY:

This work of Mukherjee, that juggles cultures over the temporal and spatial boundaries, remarkably portrays the impact of a historic diasporic subject on the psyche and sensibility of the present dissociated host.

Another work of Mukherjee that delves deep into the psyche of the native subjects is *The Namesake*. The protagonist of the novel, Gogol Ganguli, being a second generation immigrant provides the third point of view. Gogol who changes his name to Nikhil, feels more attached to his birth place (America) than his roots (in India). "Easily adapting to the life around him, Gogol provides the perfect example of the acculturated alien, who makes the land of exile his homeland" (Nityanandam). But in America he is still referred to by the Americans sociologist–panellist as 'ABCD', that is, 'American-born confused desi'.

Tara's experiences and character in Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* seem to be a replica of Mukherjee's real life. 'The Tiger's Daughter' is one of the first works of Mukherjee when she herself was undergoing the phase of expatriation. Hence, Tara's journey from an expatriate to an immigrant is a fine manifestation of Mukherjee's own experiences. Mukherjee sees this transition as "a movement away 240 from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration" (Kumar).

Bharati Mukherjee's second collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* has won the National Book Critics Circle Award. One of the most successful stories in this anthology is "Orbiting". This story introduces an Italian-American girl named Renata who is a third generation immigrant, and shows how the native Americans have begun to accept the diasporic settlers. Renata falls in love with Ro (Roashan), a first generation immigrant from Kabul—and takes it up as a duty to Americanize him and teach him the basics of survival in America. "I shall teach him how to walk like an American, how to dress like Brent but better, how to fill up room as Dad does instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way" ("Orbiting"). Renata wants Ro to adopt American lifestyle without completely dissolving his own ethnic identity. She accepts the fact that "Each culture

establishes its own manly posture, different ways of claiming space" ("Orbiting"). She wants Ro to step out of the cultural niche and explore a life in the interstices of cultures.

"Mukherjee's art of characterization depends heavily upon contrasting the public and private selves of her principal characters . . . (Pati). Therefore, Maya, a professor in the English Department at the University of Northern Iowa has a superficial image of a bold adventurer who has closed all doors to her Indian past. But her divorce with her American husband (Fred) is an evidence of her retaliation against Fred's attack on her ethnicity when he refers to both of them "as two wounded people" ("The Tenant") – he being without arms and Maya, emotionally and spiritually wounded during her struggle to come to terms with America. This triggers the appalling loneliness in Maya, and she resists her 'Indianness' being recognised as freakish and wounded as Fred. "She knows she is strange, and lonely, but being Indian is not the same. She would have thought, as being a freak" ("The Tenant"). Fred's comment foregrounds Maya's lacerated psyche which is the consequence of being entangled in a mingled web of two completely different cultures. "She has changed her citizenship, but she hasn't broken through into the light, the vigour, the bustle of the New World" ("The Tenant").

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