

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 2 February 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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Alienation to Assimilation –

The Evolution of Bharati Mukherjee's Writing

P. Santhi, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., B.Ed.

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Bharati Mukherjee's writing Deals with Issues

Keeping in line with the post-modern Indian English writing, especially by novelists like Salman Rushdie, Upamanyu Chatterjee and Amitav Ghose, Bharati Mukherjee's writing is innovative and non-conformist. Bharati Mukherjee always focuses on some issues related to the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates. She also has focused on Indian women and their struggle in

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India in some of her early novels. Her own clash with identity has come up in many of her writings.

The Focus of This Paper

This paper aims to show the change in her work, from a primary concern with the Indian expatriate's experience in the new society to a situation where the expatriate becomes an immigrant. The expatriate is slowly assimilated into the host society at all levels, psychological, sociological and linguistic, thus truly breaking the umbilical cord with their homeland. This evolution of Bharati Mukherjee is seen almost chronologically, as with each subsequent work, the writer's involvement with her mother country diminishes.

The theme of identity in Mukherjee's novels and the dichotomy in her attitude to her homeland and the paradoxes and the contradictions in the immigrant psyche are also traced in this paper. Her later writing is more at ease with new identities, and displays no undue need to recapture her Indianness as more and more she gets assimilated with the American milieu.

Themes and Language of Immigrant Writers

An increasing number of Third-World writers had emigrated to the West and had chosen to write in the English language. The style and content of their writing have been greatly influenced by the extent to which they have been able to identify themselves and adapt to their new surroundings. Those who still feel alienated in their new country tend to write about people and events which are typical of their country of origin and anxious to infuse Indian local colours in their writing.

However, those who have been able to identify with their new host country are blessed with a bi-cultural perception which enables them to write from a wider and more exiting

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angle. This is what we see in Mukherjee's fiction. In fact, her writing displays a definite multi-cultural understanding, as her new home North America, is home to immigrants from many countries.

In this respect in her paper "Inside the Outsider" Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "Today it is not at all rare to find a writer for whom the multi-cultural situation is not only a subject matter but a mode of perception."

Meaning and Aspects of Identification

Identification means becoming the same or essentially alike. It also implies certain homogeneity and a coalescence or assimilation. Identification can be at many levels: psychological, sociological, linguistic, cultural or emotional. To alienate means "to make hostile where previously friendship had existed." So, in an expatriate writer's case, this would imply a sort of hostile distancing from the home land, as well as a latent hostility implied or experienced for the adopted country.

Mukherjee's works show these aspects of identity and alienation. Her earlier works show a complex weaving of colonialism, history and culture shocks, as these works still have some ties with the homeland. But, in contrast, Mukherjee said in November 1987 in an interview with Alison B. Carb, "My style has changed because I am becoming more Americanized with each passing year.... I left India by choice to settle in the U.S. I have adopted this country as my home.... I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived in Ellis Island".

At first she lived as an Indian expatriate in Canada. Then being an immigrant in the United States, she has had her current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of

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immigrants. Her efforts to find her identity in her Indian heritage had often failed to her utter dismay.

The Tiger's Daughter

Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), is the story of Tara, born in Calcutta and schooled in New York and married to an American. Tara, the convent educated daughter of a Calcutta Zamindar, returns home after seven years in America. Mukherjee seems compelled to work out her old country from her psyche, and in order to do so, makes a metaphorical trip back to Calcutta through her protagonist, Tara. This is to the Naxalite Calcutta of the late sixties and early seventies - one full of riots and protests. Mukherjee here tries to 'typecast' Calcutta by detailing its seamier side and its riots: "In time, the sidewalks beneath Joynto grew restless with Refugees from East Bengal and Tibet. Rioters became insolent. Powerful landowners were at first tormented, later beheaded."

Hostility in Writing Signifying Alienation

There is certain hostility in this writing, perhaps implying Mukherjee's alienation, both with her mother country as well as her new homeland (Canada) at this point. Mukherjee says in her introduction to *Darkness*: "In the years 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. "This double alienation is expressed through Tara, who is intended to portray a clash of cultures-she is "pushed to the edges of her old work yet exiled from the new".

Ambivalence of an Immigrant

In this novel, we see Mukherjee's ambivalence at being an immigrant in Canada, for when Tara's American husband, David, writes to her, he says, "I miss you very much. But I

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understand you have to work this out”. He wants her to work out her identity by finding out whether it lies with the old country or the new. Tara feels that “in India she was not married to a person, but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden”.

This implies that even in her land, with her Western outlook and education, Tara felt an alien, as she did in North America where she was racially an outsider. Thus there is alienation at two levels. In the end, the two worlds cannot be reconciled, and since the alienation from the mother country seems stronger, Tara chooses to return to David and America. Though at cross-roads still, we get the impression, that the author is now one step closer towards psychologically working out the old country from her psyche.

Wife

In her next novel, *Wife* (1975) also written while Mukherjee was going through her hostile stage in Canada, we see a definite alienation leading to a feeling of dispossession from her heritage in Dimple, the protagonist of the novel. In Dimple Das Gupta’s case, the dispossession culminates in a terrible brutalization of her psyche and a scarring of her character. “Dimple, the pliant obedient daughter of middle class Indian parents, is married off to Amit Basu, an ambitious engineer about to emigrate to the U.S. Dimple struggles to adjust to life in New York city, but the culture shock is too much for her and in the end, she is driven to despair, madness and violence and she ends up killing her husband.

Perhaps the killing of her husband can be viewed as being Western, as Mukherjee has declared in a recent interview “Dimple Das Gupta of *Wife* rises to murder her domineering husband, something she never would have done in India. Here she would have killed herself.

But in America transformation allows her to kill him. She is my dark-faced female Clint Eastwood". (Express Magazine, March 11, 1990).

Darkness

We see that in *Darkness* (1985) Mukherjee is closer to her host country for she declares here "The New World forces you to know what you really want" – and what Mukherjee is striving for is assimilation. She definitely comes one step closer to this goal in her next work - *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1989).

Middleman and Other Stories

In this collection of short stories, Mukherjee writes about how energetic and diverse immigrants are altering the North American mosaic, as the new changing American is the theme of the stories of *The Middleman*. The fact that she uses the exotica of her Indian background to graduate into the American experience is clearly visible here, as she gradually moves away from themes of expatriation and nostalgia to focus on changing identities and formation of emotional ties to North America.

Straightforward Spinning of Tales

The one thing that stands out in this collection is the straightforward manner in which Mukherjee spins a tale - she tells the stories of these immigrants without any fuss or sentimentality and it is her very matter of fact narration which in the end grips us.

In this collection of short stories, Mukherjee displays great mastery over voice and vocabulary and the true versatility of her range is clearly seen and she writes in different styles. As mentioned earlier, identification and assimilation for an expatriate writer has to be on a linguistic level as well, and this is something that Mukherjee seems to have perfected.

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Margaret Atwood (1988) says of *The Middleman*: “This is Bharati Mukherjee at her dire best, exploring the New World like a cross between Lucretia Borgia and a wise child from Saturn, seizing each opening for the stiletto and commenting blithely on unsavoury details, the natives would prefer to sweep under the carpet.” Mukherjee says about immigrants, “As they change citizenships they are reborn”.

Days and Night in Calcutta

In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, the author narrates her own experiences of coming back to India after fourteen years. These perspectives reflect the internal conflict that Mukherjee experiences as an Indian woman who has left her traditional home to settle in the highly intolerant atmosphere of the West. In the process, Mukherjee examines the passed-over possibilities of her life as an upper-middle-class Indian woman. She talks to women of different background and gets the feel of Indian scenario.

One notices a significant movement or change of direction from *The Tiger’s Daughter* to *Darkness*. *The Tiger’s Daughter* is the story of shattered dreams; the saga of culture conflict. The fictionalized story is drawn from the writer’s own experience. The hankering to experience the land that is in the memory and then the utter disillusionment makes this novel a true anecdote of sheer reality.

Bob Shacochis (1998) writes, “Bharati Mukherjee has a genius for kidnapping our culture then returning it to us, with a ruby in its ear, cardamom on its breath, gold threads, of syncretism, woven through its imagination”.

In *Darkness* it can be noticed that Mukherjee is moving closer to her host country and what Mukherjee is striving for is assimilation. She comes one step closer to this goal in her

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next novel – *The Middle Man and Other Stories* (19819). The new changing American is the theme of *The Middle Man*. She slowly moves away from themes of expatriation and nostalgia and started focusing on the changing identities and formation of emotional ties to North America. Bharati Mukherjee’s writing clearly shows her gradual moving from alienation to assimilation.

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