



DIASPORIC ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee holds an esteemed position among the diasporic writers of Indian origin with her remarkable contributions like *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Desirable Daughter* etc. Her literary works are firmly based on the immigrants' experience in a completely alien land, the intense pain of dislocation and displacement from one's homeland towards adopting and adapting the foreign country and its different culture. Although Bharati Mukherjee was born and brought up in India, she spent most of her literary career in USA and Canada. Naturally she can well connect her own experience with the feelings and sensibilities of the immigrants who suddenly feel themselves uprooted from their homeland but find it too difficult to adjust and assimilate in the new ambience, new culture and standards of society. Bharati Mukherjee's works attract the readers' attention for the authentic overtone, realistic description, penetrating observatory power while her portrayal of characters evokes originality in their Indianness and their feelings so genuinely expressed as to mesmerize the readers in the narrative. This paper intends to highlight Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of the immigrants, their intense feelings of loneliness in the present situation, nostalgia towards past and the problems of identity in connecting the two disparate cultures.

Keywords: Immigration, Identity Crisis, Cultural Dissonance, Social Mainstreaming, Cross-cultural Conflict, Dilemma, Trauma, Native Culture, Host Culture.

The word 'Diaspora' refers to the migration of the people from one country to another country. Originally, a Greek term, Diaspora means 'scattering' or 'dispersal'. It is associated with the dispersal of the Jewish people from their original homeland, and it has also a sinister connection. Robin Cohen says: "Diaspora signified a collective trauma, banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile" (ix). Thus, with reference to the Greeks, the Armenians and the Jewish people diaspora was ancient migration.

'Diaspora' is the word from the Greek language. It is a double-edged concept. In it, 'dia' is a preposition, which, when used in compound word, means division and 'dispersion' and – 'spiro' literally means "to sow seeds". It suggests, on the one hand, the idea of dispersion and on the other hand, that of stasis and stability. Literally, sowing seeds suggests new life and new roots. Etymological meaning of the word 'diaspora' is "to scatter about, disperse" Oxford English Dictionary defines diaspora as the voluntary or forcible movement of

people from their homelands into new regions. Oxford English Dictionary (1989) traces the etymology of the word 'Diaspora' back to its Greek root and to its appearance in The Bible, particularly in "The Old Testament" (Deut : 28 : 25). It considers the word as a reference to God's intentions for the people of Israel to be dispersed across the world. Later, in 1993 edition, the word 'diaspora' is defined as referring to any group of people living outside their traditional homeland. In post colonial studies, it is defined as the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions. Historically, diasporas are the results of migration.

Diasporic communities are viewed as results of their own dispersal or mobility under specific historical conditions. It can also be taken as the gathering of exiles and emigres and refugees. These diasporas occupy the in-between space. Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora border and dislocation. It is a space where economic, political, cultural and psychic processes conglomerate or confluence. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed and disavowed. It involves hybridity and cross-cultural encounters. The etymological analysis of diaspora reveals a dual metaphor between roots / routes. It entails fragmentation and deterritorialization. Diasporas in their exodus become ethno religious minority community in a foreign / alien land, whose members live informally outside a homeland while maintaining active contacts with it. It highlights the existence of diasporas as transnational networks of people and their sense of belonging in communities beyond spatial boundaries. Some of the characteristic features of diaspora are :

- dispersal from an original centre to peripheral regions.
- perpetuated myth of the homeland
- sense of alienation in their host lands
- idealization of their home land as a place to which they will return.

It involves problems like problematic and potentials of assimilation, acculturation, and transculturation, nativism and the hostility of host lands, generational conflict and continuities in the production or reproduction of culture and the migratory experiences and the significance of memory for the production of imaginary homelands. Significantly, displacement leads to identity crisis which creates alienation – alienation of vision and the crisis in self image in the displaced. It leads to stubborn assertion of identity as exhibited / exercised by Mukherjee in *Darkness and Middleman*, which are the best examples of diaspora literature like V.S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*.

In the modern period, the term has gained significance after 1970, especially in postcolonial period though migration has been a wide phenomenon during the colonial period, which was marked by the mobility of goods and people. In the period of globalization and postmodernism, the migration has assumed different characteristics, as the sociologists Ajay Sahoo and Brij Maharaj observe, globalization transcends territory, location, distance and borders and has been accompanied by rapid migration of people across borders, and has raised questions about identity, citizenship and nationality. (1) However, every migration does not lead to diaspora, unless it satisfies certain conditions which Judith Shuval captures thus,

A diaspora is a social construct founded on feeling, consciousness, memory, mythology, history, meaningful narratives, group identity, and longings, dreams allegorical and virtual elements all of which play an important role in establishing a diaspora reality. At a given moment of time the sense of connection to homeland must be strong enough to resist forgetting, assimilating or distancing. (41)

This definition pinpoints the six characteristics of Diaspora viz 1) History of dispersal 2) Myths and memories of the homeland remembered or kept alive 3) alienation in the host country 4) desire for eventual return 5) on going support of homeland and lastly 6) a collective identity defined by the above relationship. The diasporic community, characterized by the above feature, negotiates its living conditions in the land of migration as it differs from the native people, in respect of class, race, ethnicity, gender and religion. It

struggles to preserve its identity and ethnicity and also it is eager to join the mainstream population of the land of migration. Its struggles and experiences are best represented in the literature it produces, since creative writing is a mode of assertion of one's own identity and recognition. Jasbir Jain observes :Expatriate writing occupies a significant position between cultures and countries. It generates theory and defines positions as it constructs a new identity which negotiates boundaries and confines and relates to different temporal and spatial metaphors. Cultures travel and take root or get dislocated and individuals internalize nostalgia or experience amnesia, writers living abroad live on the margins of two societies, and cultural theory is today being created by people who live on the margins. (11)

Most of the diasporic literature is therefore marked by the issues of identity, home and nation in relation to the migrant. The diasporic home is a centre of debate as it leads to the question of diasporic identity and feelings of homelessness, alienation, desire for assimilation and acceptance etc.

Darkness is Mukherjee's conscious attempt to embrace one of the elements of diaspora, a kind of immigration to the United States. She wrote it as the writer-in- residence at Emory University in the winter of 1984 semester. It is a narrative of immigrant experiences with diasporic elements like dislocation, homeland, hostland, culture, transculturalism, multiculturalism, acculturation, assimilation, negation, border, dislocation, generational conflicts, migratory experience, nostalgia, memory, desire to return and so on. . In it, she has drawn on her memories as well as the experiences of her South Asian friends and acquaintances and relied in some cases on newspaper reports. She relates about it in her essay "A Four-Hundred-year-old Woman", where she begins to see herself and her "own experiences refracted through a dozen separate lives" (25). The immigrants include : illegal and legal immigrants, first-and second-generation North Americans, rich and poor South Asians on the continent, Professionals as well as migrant or menial workers, and so on. In Darkness, Mukherjee has not used a mordant and self protective irony. In Darkness, she says 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" (2). In Darkness, she is not an expatriate looking back to India with pain and nostalgia but an immigrant who shares the common grievances of those who are like her, impelled by an insistent urge to voice aspirations of those new settlers. Mukherjee sees her immigration into America as "a movement away from aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration" (D 3). Fakrul Alam in Bharati Mukherjee says :

The best way to approach Darkness, then, is to see it as a collection of stories that reveals a variety of responses to immigration to North America. In other words, while a few of the stories show immigrants striving to root themselves in North America, most approach the plight of expatriates on the continent soberly and even with a touch of despair. If Malamud's humanism has inspired some of Mukherjee's tales of immigrant lives, others employ the kind of irony she had learned from Naipaul in presenting people, who cannot or will not graft themselves into another culture. Also it is important to keep in mind that by calling the collection Darkness, Mukherjee is deliberately reminding us of Conrad's grim novella about human nature as revealed in extreme situations of cultural displacement. (51)

Darkness is a transitional work with diasporic elements. In it, a few of her stories are meant to capture something of a more positive mood about immigration to North America induced in Mukherjee by her move to the United States in 1980. Gradually, she began to see herself as just another diaspora writer. Instead of holding on to her Indianness, she could now join imaginative forces with an anonymous, driven underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return, a peculiar diaspora element. She had, "the will to bond herself to a new community against the ever-present fear of failure and betrayal" (D 3). Her short story, "The Management of Grief" reflects her continuing predicament with Indians in Canada whose lives had been shattered by events. Fakrul Alam in Bharati Mukherjee classifies the stories of Darkness into groups :

1. "The World According to Hsu", "Isolated Incidents", and "Tamurlane" can be called Canadian stories. They are also stories of the "aloofness of expatriation" and the bitter tales of people who cannot root themselves in Canadian culture because of multiculturalism and racism.
2. "A Father" and "Nostalgia" are set in the United States with South Asian men who call themselves expatriates.
3. "Saints" and "The Imaginary Assassin" have narrators, who are immigrant youths born in North America and are attracted to Indian stories about saints.
4. "The Lady from Lucknow" and "Visitors" are about Indian wives, who are frustrated in their attempts to find satisfaction and fulfillment in their lives outside their marriages.
5. Only "Angela" and "Hindus" are considered as stories where characters have liberated themselves from the country where they were born to accept America.
6. Only "The Courtly vision" is *sui generis*.

"Angela", the first story in *Darkness* is written from the point of view of a Bangladeshi girl who has been adopted by a family in Iowa after she had been orphaned by Pakistani soldiers attempting to suppress her people's struggle for independence. "The Lady from Lucknow", uses the first person point of view. The narrator is a middle-aged Muslim woman, called Nafeesa Hafeez, who has settled in Atlanta with her husband after a life full of diasporic moves across several continents. The third story, "The World According to Hsu" returns to the omniscient mode of story telling. Mukherjee's omniscient narrator presents the story mostly from the point of view of a married woman. The narrator is Ratna Clayton, a 35 year-old Canadian journalist of mixed origin, vacationing in an island off the coast of the southern most part of Africa. "A Father" also uses an omniscient narrator reflecting events from the perspective of the protagonist, a middle-aged expatriate engineer from Bihar, India, who had made Detroit his home. "Isolated Incidents" has the omniscient narrator. It focuses attention on a white Canadian woman called Ann Vane, who works in a Human Rights office in Toronto. Mukherjee uses omniscient mode for her sixth story, "Nostalgia". This tale is set in New York and follows the middle-aged psychiatric consultant, Dr. Manny Patel, as he tries to enjoy a tryst with an attractive Indian sales girl in a Manhattan Hotel. Mukherjee reverts to the first person mode in "Tamurlane". In it, the narrator is one of a member of illegal immigrants from the Indian province of Punjab, who works in a hotel in Toronto. Leela Lahiri, a Bengali Brahmin woman, employed as an administrative assistant in a New York publishing firm, narrates the subsequent story, titled "Hindus". The ninth story of *Darkness* is "Saints". It is in first-person narrative. Its narrator, Shawn Patel, is the son of Dr. Manny Patel of "Nostalgia". The setting is a small college town in upstate New York where Shawn and his mother have moved after his parents separated. In "Visitors", Mukherjee returns to omniscient storytelling. It is set in New Jersey. The situation is somewhat as it is presented in her novel *Wife*. "The Imaginary Assassin" is the penultimate story of *Darkness*. It employs two narrators. In it, a young Sikh boy growing up in Yuba City, California, records a story that his grandfather tells him about the circumstances that led him to flee India in 1947. The last story in *Darkness* is not about the experience of immigration to North America. "Courtly Vision" may not be taken as a story. It is a description of a Mughal painting that Mukherjee uses as a metaphor for the immigrant's vision of immigrant lives.

Angela is the titular character of the first story of *Darkness*. She has a surer knowledge of where she should be going even though she is indelibly scarred by the physical and emotional wounds she had received as a six-year-old girl brutalized by Pakistani soldiers attempting to prevent the birth of Bangladesh in 1971. Throughout the short story, Angela remembers the violence done to her and her country by the soldiers. These memories flood her consciousness. In the end of the story, she considers the possibility of marrying a Doctor, Dr. Menezies, the middle-aged Indian doctor, who is part of her Iowa circle of acquaintances. Dr. Menezies is a considerate and earnest man. However, Angela resists the thought of marrying him because of the contemptuous feelings related to the sense of security he can give her as a husband and their common origins in "the hunger and misery of the subcontinent" (D 8). However, it seems in the story that Dr. Menezies is not

able to understand Angela's experience of war, orphan homes, adoption by an American family, and a major automobile accident that has spared her but left her adopted sister Delia in a critical condition. She hopes that she should "Wait for some sign" and "has been saved for a Purpose" (D 19). Mrs. Grimlund, the nurse, who is looking after Delia in the hospital, knows Angela is very strong in her attitude. It is as Fakrul Alam in Bharati Mukherjee observes : "'Angela' is, in essence, the tale of a survivor who seems destined to retain her independence and go her own way in life. If the horrible memories of the past come to her mind at the conclusion, they do so only as a kind of defense mechanism to warn her against any action such as marriage to Dr. Menezies, which will reconnect her to the land she had to leave" (68) In fact, Angela accepts America even though there are certain unpleasant memories of the past in her memory and in her blood and mind. As a diasporic piece of literature, Angela relates wishful longing to return to the homeland and physical violence. It is a story of nostalgia and the resultant alienation as her wish had not been fulfilled in the short story.

In "The Lady from Lucknow", Nafessa Hafeez is a daughter of an army doctor. After partition, the family of Nafessa migrates to Rawalpindi in Pakistan from Lucknow. At seventeen, she married a man called Iqbal, who works for IBM. She has to follow him from Pakistan to Lebanon, Brazil, Zambia, France and eventually to Atlanta, Georgia.

She has two children. Iqbal feels insecure in America. As far as Nafessa, she has always yearned for pleasures defying all taboos like the girl next door in Lucknow. So that only Mitali R. Pati in "Love and the Indian immigrant in Bharati Mukherjee's Short Fiction" says that her "first-person narrative contrasts the puritanical upbringing of Islamic woman with her own craving for romantic and sexual fulfillment" (206). In America, Nafessa tries for a life of a passion by loving a sixty-five year old white man, James Beamish, her white lover and a passionate flatterer. He makes Nafessa feel "beautiful, exotic, responsive" (D 25). Her liaison with Beamish is not only an attempt to express her independence and individuality but it also offers her an illusion that by carrying on an illicit love-affair she is somehow identifying herself with America. She wears a front closing bra and silky new underwear. Her romance crumbles down as she is discovered in bed unexpectedly by Beamish's wife, who is too used to her husband's infidelities to care. Kate, Beamish's wife, sees her only as an exotic capable of provoking only a passing interest in her husband. Suddenly, Nafessa sees herself caught in a different patriarchal paradigm. She identifies herself as the white man's coloured mistress. She realizes her own sexual exploitation. The irony is she becomes a sexual object.

Stories such as "The Lady from Lucknow" and "Visitors" have the central characters, who are mere reflectors of what Mukherjee had made earlier to immigrate into United States of America. In "The Lady from Lucknow", a married woman, that too muslim woman, called Nafessa, the restless Indian wife, likes to go beyond the confines of her marriage to embrace America but whose sexual adventure ends unsatisfactorily. She reminds of Dimple in Wife. Peter Nazereth in "Total Vision" points out that "The Lady from Lucknow" deals with "the undermining in America of the myths and illusions about marriage with which an Indian woman is brought up" (188). It is a typical story of a diaspora literature with myths and illusions about marriage and cross-cultural sexual encounter and its humiliation.

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