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Indian-American immigrant experience and Portrayal of Women Protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels

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Abstract

This paper attempst to study apparent thematic pattern in Bharati Mukherjee's novel her **major theme is expatriation** but includes other postcolonial ideas as well. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most eminent Indian born American writers, who had contributed much to the enrichment of Indian Writing in English. Being an immigrant writer, most of her writings are about the subject of immigration history, search for identity, diasporism, assimilation, cultural conflicts, etc with autobiographical touch. The unresolved dilemma of a modern woman who was shaped in patriarchal culture was evidently portrayed in her novels. Throughout restless hopeful rush of immigration and the changeableness of cultures, she has enthralled her imagination. This paper aims at the exploration of cultural conflicts in her novel, Wife. Mukherjee's non-fictional works are also quite noteworthy, **The Days and Night in Calcutta** is a non-fictional work written in collaboration with her Canadian husband **Clark Blaise**. It is a travelogue to Calcutta with observations about the city in particular but India in general. It is partly travelogue and partly autobiographical. She has also tried to portray the consciousness of Indian woman. Her narrative deals with gender, race, religion and the country at large. Her another non-fictional work **The Sorrow and the Terror** deals with Air India tragedy. It is an account of the Air India plane in the ocean. Her work **Political Culture and Leadership in India** (1991) shows her observations on Indian politics and leadership. Her views show her independent unbiased thinking and maturity of understanding of world politics. **Regionalism in Indian perspective** (1992) focuses on one of the major problems of Indian-regionalism. Regionalism in India is both a sign of diversity of tongue, life style, religion and culture and weakness. Mukherjee wrote articles on current issues and on great figures like Mother Teresa. Bharati Mukherjee has published two collections of short stories : **Darkness** (1985) and **The Middleman and other stories** (1988) In her first collection of short stories, conflicts and tensions between the old world and the new world have been brilliantly depicted. The lives of the Indian expatriates have been portrayed vividly **The Middleman and other stories** has won National Books Critics Award in 1988. The protagonists of these stories are from different countries like India, Italy, Hungary, Afghanistan etc. She highlights fact that America is not just a melting pot but shaper and moulder of a new democratic culture. The major themes of these stories are alienation, struggle for identity, search for home and struggle for survival. Mukherjee concentrates on the transformation and assimilation that rerooting requires. It can be said that her short stories are the miniature world of larger fictional world of immigrants that she has portrayed in her novels.

Key words: Depression, Diasporism, Imagination, Immigration, Insomnia

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee (July 27, 1940 – January 28, 2017) has herself become one of the literary voices whose skillful depictions of the contemporary non-European immigrant experience in the United States she credits with "subverting the very notion of what the American novel is and of what American culture is." In Canada she kept her "Indianness" smugly intact despite—or because of—a painful awareness of her displacement in the West. She consciously regarded other immigrants, as she notes in the introduction to Darkness, as "lost souls, put upon and pathetic," in contrast to the more ironically sophisticated postcolonials with whom she identified: people "who knew all too well who and what they were, and what foul fate had befallen them," and who therefore escaped the emotional turmoil of divided loyalties or assimilationist incongruities.

In Mukherjee's two critically acclaimed short-story collections she sets out to "present a full picture, a complicated picture of America," one in which evil as well as good operates and where "we, the new pioneers, who are still thinking of America as a frontier country . . . are improvising morality as we go along." Although she unblinkingly paints the bigotries that bedevil her protagonists, she resists casting them as victims

because they don't think of themselves as victims. On the contrary, they think of themselves as conquerors. We have come not to passively accommodate ourselves to someone else's dream of what we should be.We've come to America, in a way, to take over. To help build a new culture . . . with the same guts and energy and feistiness that the original American Pilgrims had.

Mukherjee's first collection of short fiction is something of a transitional work in documenting the shift in sensibility that occurred when she left Canada for the United States. Three of its twelve stories reveal a lingering bitterness about Canadian prejudice toward its Indian citizens and concern themselves with the problems that such prejudice generates in the lives of individuals still wrestling with the question of whether they believe themselves to be in voluntary exile or hopeful selftransformation. The stories set in the United States, by way of contrast, regard the immigrant experience more dynamically and offer "a set of fluid identities to be celebrated" as a result of Mukherjee's having personally "joined 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." In this new context her own "Indianness" functions less "as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration" than as "a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world." The U.S.-based Indian protagonists of Darkness generate stories "of broken identities and discarded languages, and the will to bond oneself to a new community, against the ever-present fear of failure or betrayal."

Objective:

This paper scrutinizes a multiplicity of tribulations that occur in ordinary woman's life, the quandary of bodily and psychologically beleaguered women and ultimately venture to specify the connotation of being a modern woman in order to surmount the obstructions depicted in Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

A Postcolonial Perspective on Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

The 'novel' as a literary phenomenon is new to India. Epics, lyrics, dramas, short stories have been flourished in Indian soil by several centuries. But this long fiction of prose has laid its root only a few decades ago. Bharati Mukherjee, one of the eminent Indian writers, had contributed much to the enhancement of Indian Writing in English. Bharati Mukherjee's Wife discloses the life history of a young woman who travels to US after marriage with her husband and discloses her inability to cope with the new culture of US. In new world, she passes through physical, mental and emotional torture that affect herwhole being, resulting in her violence of murdering her husband. The novel begins with the portrayal of Dimple Dasgupta, the pliant, docile, obedient and submissive daughter of a middle class Bengali family, fully fantasized about marriage. Dimple has set her heart to marry a neuro surgeon, but her father was looking for engineers. The author exhibits the fantasy of a girl about marriage. "Dimple wanted a different kind of life- an apartment in Chowringee, her hair done by Chinese girls, trips to New Market for nylon saris – so she placed her faith in neurosurgeons and architects.(3) Dimple considers her marriage as a fantasized world full of cocktail parties, freedom and love.

Being a lady of slight depression she often worries at her figure. In her imagination there is no room for day to day issues like water shortage, electricity failure, and adjustment with in-laws. Dimple's father finds a suitable boy for her, Amit Basu, a consultant engineer. Dimple Dasguptra becomes Dimple Basu. The author portrayed it as a perfect marriage, pointing that there were one hundred and five photos to prove their perfectness. Dimple has to stay with her in –laws on top of the three storeyed building on Dr. Sarat Banerjee road. Dimple dislikes her new name (Nandhini) given by her mother-in-law. She develops hatred towards her new atmosphere, the sofa set, and her bedroom curtains. The lack of happiness, which she expected in married life, develops longingness for US in her. The discussion about their migration makes her buoyant. Her dream to live in a new world is so high that she reacts quit different to a normal woman towards her pregnancy. For a simple reason of going to US she aborts her pregnancy. Basu's house upsets her in every way that the thoughts of happiness elude her. She frantically repeats, that Dimple Basu is a happy woman. Even after their migration to US, there is no much improvement in her mindset.

Fresh troubles encircle her. She is left alone at home. In India, she receives various complements about her husband from her friends and her mother. She had kept him in high esteem in India whereas in US the odds are against him. Being a jobless person he becomes more and more self-centered and less self assured. Amit tries to keep her happy despite his own struggle to find a job. But he is unable to spend much time with her as he has to be out for long hours. His own trouble has muted him from her mental and psychological turmoil. She spends most of her time in isolation. Immigrating to America symbolizes her escapism from restrained Indian society. In US she seesaws between the culture of India that stands for restrictions and America that stands for freedom. Dimple experiences both her own and borrowed culture. Dimple finds it hard to accept the reality. Her dreams are purely materialistic and full of luxury. In the life's struggle Dimple finds it hard to cope up with. She prefers to be an escapist engaging herself in the world of dreams. In isolation, her mind is controlled by the newspaper advertisement and advice columns. In her new avatar she has even started to develop a liking towards Jyoti Sen their shelter provider.

Due to their poor economic situation, she finds her dreams shattering down. Dimple's friendship with Ina Mullick influences her, a lot that she begins to challenge the traditional values followed in India for centuries by Indian wife and womanhood.In her frustration of missing all her life which she dreamt, she gives herself in the hands of Milt Glacier. Her desperation and isolation grows more acute. Dimple loses her sleep and is affected with insomnia. She fails to adapt herself as an American by dressing herself in borrowed outfit of Marsh and flirting with Milt Glassel. Her fond of attraction for Milt and her frequent

interaction with him, infuses hatred in her for Amit. Right from the very first day in New York, all that Dimple hears and sees on the Television is about muggings, rape, murder to which she falls as an easy victim. Highly fascinated and inspired by the ad, Dimple, starts to hate Sen's apartment which liked once and found comfortable too. When Dimple realizes that life doesn't honor her, she feels distressed. To live the life of ordinary is beyond her imagination that she hates all those who are ordinary- the Sens, the Basus and Amit. Gradually, Dimple loses her grip on her thoughts which constantly makes her lose her identity. She finds it hard to pen her mother. She pens only to her friend Pixie, that too in dreams.

Her continuous failure has enraged her ending in frustration. Dimple in her effort to escape from frustration, she sleeps for nineteen hours out of twenty four keeping herself away from Amit. She develops indifferences towards life. Murder, suicide, violence haunt her continuously. She not only withdraws from Amit but also from her household chores. "Everything scared her; the spluttering of the radiators, the brown corduroy sofa with depressions – the needles in the rug, the ironing board … the cactus that had not flowered the way it was supposed to, the smudgy wide windows behind the dining table." (156) She is unable to be friendly with the Sens, who supported them initially. Constant demand of her psyche makes her highly disturbed that she creates a theory of suicide and murder. When Dimple realises that life doesn't honour her claims, her hope of life is shattered. She blames others for her loses, thus avoiding self hatred. She is alienated herself from her family, friends and the society. Her loses disturbs her a lot that even in dreams, she dreams terrible things like lizards, murderers, burglars, etc.

While living with Sen's family in the homely atmosphere at Queens, Dimple's fits of insomnia are few but after their shift to Manhattan, being left alone she is lost in her failures of life. Jyoti Sen too has warned Amit about the evil impact of Ina Mullick on Dimple. But Amit lacking Jyoti's acumen states, "With so many Indians around and a television and a child, a woman should not get crazy ideas." (41) Mr. Milt Glasser, the American boy friend of Ina, drops at Dimple's house often and falls in love with her. Dimple, being misled by the American culture murders her husband, Amit. Life doesn't give any hope to her. The emptiness in her mind without any aim leads her to kill her husband. Immigration is like a star, collapsing inwardly. There is a tug of war in her consciousness whether to follow the culture of India or America. She struggles between the old conservative world of traditional India and the new modern democratic world of America. Dimple is being pressurized by a series of oppressions. Being entrapped between two cultures, she aspires for a third one, her imaginative world. The author, through the novel Wife, depicted an Indian woman's exile to America and her inability to copeup with the new culture. Mukherjee portrayed how Dimple's hope begins with marriage and how the same marriage ends her dream with despair. The author through Dimple unveiled how the freedom from the ponds of family and traditional bonds leaves one into desperation. New country and new culture with democracyneed not to be a Utopiato everyone. Assimilation in a new culture is an art which Dimple fails to possess.

Thematic Analysis of Indian-American immigrant experience and Women Protagonists

Bharati Mukherjee never let the reader's attention to divert from her characters. "The survivor is the one who improvises, not the one who plays by the rules." In the novel of Bharati Mukherjee, one can notice that she focuses at depicting the psyche of the immigrants, who fails to deal with their changed circumstances and cultures. She also unveils the tension created in the mind between the two socio-culture environments, accompanied with the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia. As while reading about Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Myles, a critic states: Bharati Mukherjee believes that good fiction concentrates on the

emotional, intellectual and physical responses of a group of characters when they are placed in a situation not routine to them. She felt that psychic violence leave a stronger impact on the mind than physical violence on the body. Therefore, her women characters make interesting psychological studies. There is a continuous urge in her women to build up their fragmented life and to express their affirmation to life. True enough, while they attempt to do so, they appear abnormal in their behaviour but sometimes this is only in a bid to live life on their own terms. (Myles 108-109)

Desirable Daughters (2002) is Bharati Mukherjee sixth novel where she explores the making of a consciousness." The protagonist is Tara, a 36 year old Indian American. She is the youngest of the three daughters of a wealthy engineer. She comes from traditional Bengali family living in Calcutta. At the age of 19, she marries Bishwapriya (Bish) Chatterjee, a suitable husband selected by her father.

Tara rejects traditional life of India while she is in the USA. She divorces her rich husband after ten years because she feels that her marriage does not give her the true status of an American wife. She moves to San Francisco with her 12 years old son. She starts working as she has already abandoned the comforts of a wealthy man's wife. She develops several short-term relationships and finally takes Andy a Hungarian Buddhist contractor. She takes him as live-in lover.

Tara begins to feel comfortable in her life but Chris Dey enters her life and disturbing her peaceful life. He claims that he is an illegitimate son of her eldest sister. His arrival into her life threatens the safe assumptions on which her new life was founded at least partly. Her glorious past seems to her like a dark cave. She also realizes that though she and her sisters were brought up in the same surrounding and training, their world view differed a lot. After Andy moves out of her life, she drifts towards her former husband. She feels that she has misunderstood him. One night, Tara and Bish are attacked in her house by explosives planted by a person who fakely identified himself as Chris Dey. It was a traumatic experience and she returns to India to live with her parents with the understanding that one's roots cannot be severed completely.

In Desirable Daughters Mukherjee marks a departure from her earlier novels. Tara wants to find her identity in the USA without obliterating her former identity. She tries to combine her Indian past and the present of American life. It is no doubt a tough process but she faces it with equilibrium and poise. She knows that women in India were subjugated yet they do not clamour that they are victims. Within their limited world, Indian women make efforts to empower themselves. They are patient, understanding and intelligent. Her ancestor Tara Lata Ganguly was a saint and freedom fighter. In each generation of women in her family, she finds something new and inspiring. Thus she realizes that family ties are important for strengthening one's identity. Tara wants to erase past that is false, hypocritical and superficial. She challenges everything that is fake and unnecessary.

Tara tries to reconnect with her sisters who do not reciprocate to her move. They continue to criticize her but she remains firm and silent. Tara has learnt to understand others and accept them. She accepts her former husband with a new understanding. She also accepts her son Rabi's homosexuality. Mukherjee suggests that in a multicultural society, one must learn to be open and transform accordingly without losing one's original identity. The novel has been praised for Mukherjee's expansion of earlier theme of immigrant life. The narrative has been skilfully woven, showing her maturity of treatment and characterization.

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee illustrates a modern woman as a girl who rebellious, mutiny next to all prospect in her life daringly, adjusts herself to all traditions and atmospheres thereby existing and livelihood her life audaciously. Mukherjee swigs the best of Indian and Western culture, finds modern women to be mandatory clarification to gaze life with modishness. Her novel Wife stands out as a unique fictional work by virtue of its insightful probing into heroine's psyche and its indubitable technical excellence. Dimple, the protagonist of Wife, is the perfect example of the misery of women in India. She suffers due to the callous and non-responsive attitude of her husband. Her husband treats her as a mere object subjected to his will as a result there is a complete loss of her identity. Mukherjee's attack is not against the individuals, it is against the system that favours men and causes women's subjugation. The other important aspect which Mukherjee highlights in this and other novels is a woman's role in the oppression and suffering of her fellow woman. In our society, women ill-treat and exploit women instead of showing love, respect and understanding for their own sex.

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