

RESEARCH ARTICLE



## FRACTURED RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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### ABSTRACT

The article "Fractured Relationships in the Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee" focuses on the challenges of hostility, exploitation and racial prejudice and discusses the issue of cultural citizenship and questions the concept of multiculturalism. The paper brings out varying perceptions on gender issues and the notion of motherhood in the diasporic space. The article further reveals the attitudinal differences between generations regarding human relationships.

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Bharati Mukherjee in her writings criticizes the assumptions entrenched in the western minds about the immigrants from India and other countries. She addresses the issue of multiculturalism, which has a tremendous influence on the making of "new" Americans. She insists that the greater presence of non-European immigrants after the liberalisation of immigrant laws in 1965 has a terrific impact on the national identity of America. She maintains a clear distinction between Canada and USA and condemns the Canada's official policy of multiculturalism which sanctions racial bigotry.

Mukherjee tells Alison B. Carb, "America, with its melting pot theory of immigration, has a healthier attitude toward Indian immigrants than Canada. Although this country has its share of racial problems there are human rights laws and ways to obtain legal redress in the courts" (29).

In her short stories Mukherjee raises a discourse on the concept of cultural citizenship. The expression stands for unity in diversity. It insists on the harmonious coexistence of the members of different cultural practices. It becomes a reality

when the westerners develop a positive attitude towards cultural distinctions that exist in a multicultural society.

Sharmani Patricia Gabriel adds further insights to the understanding of the concept, cultural citizenship, "This is what gives particular salience to the idea of cultural citizenship; as a concept that gestures to the private domain of citizenship, it brings into focus the people's emotional ties or psychological experiences of belonging, or non-belonging" (3).

Mukherjee insists that her stories are about assimilation and not about alienation. Her stories reveal the immigrant's experiences during their transformation from expatriates to immigrants. The expression "Expatriation" focuses on the home land from where people have migrated and the expression "immigration" focuses on the host country to which people come as immigrants.

In the collection of short stories titled *Darkness*, set in Canada and USA, Mukherjee

addresses the challenges of hostility, exploitation, racial prejudice, violence, cultural conflict, gender, negative stereotyping and identity<sup>1</sup>. This socio-cultural scenario of separation and struggle for identity alter human relationships significantly in the diasporic space. The title of this collection, *Darkness* symbolizes the ignorance which creates binary opposition between people of white and dark colour skins. Mukherjee's writing style is marked by irony and satire. Her dialogue is racy.

The incidents in the story, "The World According to Hsu", heavily depend on the personal experiences of Mukherjee. She draws an analogy between the geological concept of plate tectonics observed by scientist Hsu and the changing cultural norms in the diasporic space due to conflict between cultures and confluence of various cultural practices and traditions resulting in the formation of new cultures.

Through the holiday experience of Claytons in Tahiti, an island off the coast of Africa, Mukherjee recreates the socio-cultural scenario of struggle and separation in Canada from the diasporic point of view. The couple, Ratna Clayton and Graeme Clayton citizens of Canada visit the capitol of Tahiti, unaware of the coups and riots that have turned the island unsafe, for the simple pleasure of seeing the Southern Cross<sup>2</sup>.

Ratna finds the riot torn island safer than the racially prejudiced Canada for the coloured immigrants of Asian origin. Ratna, born to Zech and Indian couple, is identified as an Indian in Tahiti because of the colour of her skin. In Canada, especially in Toronto, the situation is different. Despite her Canadian citizenship, she is treated as an outsider. The dark colour of her skin is the visible marker of her ethnic identity, and she has no place in the hegemonic culture of Canada dominated by whites. "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" (Mukherjee 33).

Ratna takes advantage of every opportunity to condemn the racist Toronto in particular and Canada in general. "A week before their flight, a Bengali woman was beaten and nearly blinded on the street. And the week before that an eight-year old Punjabi boy was struck by a car announcing on its bumper: KEEP CANADA GREEN. PAINT A PAKI" (39).

Her husband Graeme, a white Canadian, has a different opinion about Toronto. He considers it the safest place in the American continent. Graeme is worried about his career. As a better position is offered in Toronto, he wants to move

from Montreal to Toronto and tries to convince Ratna that she will be safe in Toronto. His attitude irks Ratna, and she accuses him of his selfish motive. Despite all this argument and serious differences of opinion about culturally intolerant dominant whites in Canada, the couple maintains harmonious relationship. Graeme assures her that they need not move to Toronto if she does not like it.

Mukherjee insists that the state sponsored multicultural mosaic of Canada deprives the ethnic minorities the cultural citizenship of Canada. Racial prejudice strained human relationships in Canada resulting in attacks against the visible minorities of Asian origin by white Canadians. The survival of ethnic minorities is constantly under threat in Canada.

The story "Isolated Incidents" further endorses the fact that racism is a deep rooted malice in Toronto. The story is the point of view of Anne Vane, a Canadian citizen who works in the Human Rights commission. Her initial enthusiasm wanes gradually as she finds that she cannot be of any help to the victims as a human rights official. At the most, she may be able to gather some statistical data. The human rights officials are careful enough not to give any assurance to the victims in line with the official policy of Canada. The police officials too, betray the immigrants by refusing to register the attacks on them as racially motivated. In the introduction to *Darkness*, Mukherjee through her personal experiences reveals the negative attitude of white Canadians towards coloured immigrants. "If I may put it in its harshest terms, it would be this: in Canada, I was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter, frequently assumed to be a domestic, praised by astonished auditors that I didn't have a "sing-song" accent" (Xiv-xv).

A typical day in the Human Rights office in Toronto further emphasizes the hostile attitude of Canada as a nation towards ethnic minorities, especially Asian immigrants.

Dr (Miss) Supariwala who holds two doctorate degrees from Indian and Canadian universities and known for her efficiency as a teacher is a victim of discrimination. The academics too are not free from racial bigotry in Canada. The lawyer of John Mohan Persawd, victim of subway assault tells Anne Vane, "The police suggest my client got drunk and started a fight, Miss Vane. They make this boy feel like a complainer. The victims are made to feel guilty" (70).

Mukherjee clearly brings out the distinction between Toronto and New York through

the dialogic interaction between the lawyer and the human rights official. In New York people are attacked for money whereas in Canada they are racially assaulted.

Mr. Hernandez, pleads Anne Vane in vain on behalf of his sister, who is likely to be deported as her husband stops sponsoring her. He accuses Vane of being insensitive. Anne Vane shouts back and behaves just like the police officials who find fault with the victims instead of trying to help them out.

As the Canadian society is segregated on cultural identities, Asian immigrants cannot rely either on police officials or the officials in Human Rights Commission for justice. Their voice goes unheard as the colour of the skin decides the social positioning of a Canadian citizen. Relationships between civilians, and between civilians and bureaucrats are based on the colour of the skin.

Critic P.A Abraham points out, "For a writer like Bharati Mukherjee, writing is a political act. Her personal sense of marginalization as a woman, a woman of colour, and as an expatriate/immigrant makes her vent out her feelings so vehemently in her stories" (57).

The story "Tamurlane" portrays the wretched lives of the illegal immigrants. Some of them become illegal as the agents often cheat them, and immigrants have to lead lives under constant threats of arrests and deportations. Whether legal or illegal, white Torontonians despise the presence of coloured people. "Canadians don't want us, it's like Uganda all over again, says Mr. A. He says he can feel it in his bones" (Mukherjee 101).

The story is a typical encounter between immigrant officials and illegal immigrants. In the hide and seek game, sometimes the situation may take unexpected turns as the immigrants resist. The officials often suspect every coloured citizen, and the relationship between immigrant officials and legal immigrants too is far less than cordial. This hostile attitude often irks the Canadian citizens with ethnic label, and the encounters may turn violent and fatal. Envy and contempt prevent the Canadian police from finding out the status of Gupta, the tandoori chef in Mumtaz Bar B-Q. Gupta too does not reveal his Canadian citizenship till the end because of hostility, when the official questions him. "Gupta managed to sit straight. He held his Canadian passport in front of his face. That way, he never saw the drawn gun, nor did he try to dodge the single bullet" (108).

In the short story, "Angela", Mukherjee focuses on the relationship between a Bangladeshi

refugee and an immigrant medical doctor from India. More enigmatic is the relationship between the refugee and the disabled children, a relationship she has nurtured psychologically. Angela does not suffer from any cultural conflict. Her struggle is against circumstances, against the compromises she has to make for survival and against the limited opportunities.

During the Bangladesh war in 1971, Angela, the title character in the story at the age of six suffers from wartime crimes in the hands of soldiers. The soldiers cut her nipples with their bayonets, and leave her in a ditch thinking that she will die soon. Christian missionaries rescue her and later send her to Iowa. The Brandon farmers in Van Buren County in Iowa adopt her. Angela, now a teenager, has cordial relations with her new found parents and other members of the family. She does not suffer from nostalgia, but she compares her wretched and dangerous life in Dakha to the secure life in Brandons' farmhouse. Angela's acculturation and assimilation into the socio-cultural space of America is complete. The process of acculturation is not painful to Angela as in the case of other immigrants. She transcends the barriers of race and colour. The Americanization is so intense that Angela does not bother with the religious beliefs of Islam, though she was born into that religion. "On Sunday, after church, we sit down to a huge pork-roast-pigs aren't filthy creatures here as they are back home--" (9).

As an orphan in Bangladesh, she was deprived of affection and emotional bonding. In Bangladesh, she was just an orphan girl. Here, in USA she has an identity, and she is able to relate herself to others in the society with dignity. Her feeling that the past is lost to her is paradoxical. However, it shows her determination to let go the past and reinvent a new identity. "The coach has put me on the varsity cheerleading squad. To make me feel wanted. I'm grateful. I am wanted. Love is waving big, fluffy pom-poms in school colors; it's wearing new Nikes and leaping into the air" (12).

Her relationship with Delia is intense. At her instance, Angela was brought to Iowa from Dakha. Delia is injured in a road accident and slips into coma. Angela visits her regularly in the local hospital where she is admitted and tries to keep Delia's boy friend cheerful. Dr. Vinny Menezies who treats Delia is a bachelor, and he tries to woo Angela. Professionally well settled 40 years old Dr. Menezies starts looking for a wife, and his choice falls on Angela. He makes use of every opportunity either in the hospital or in Brandons' farmhouse to tell her that he is deeply in love with her. He

discourages her from pursuing higher studies as that will spoil the opportunity to marry her. He speaks of their common ethnic background as a favourable condition and as a binding force. Angela has integrated socially into American space, but as a teenager, her economic integration is incomplete. Pointing out to her dependency Dr. Menezies says that it is not fair on her part to make Brandons spend several thousand dollars for her studies and tempts her with secure and rich domestic life. One Sunday after dinner in Brandons' farm house when they are alone Angela offers her body to Dr. Menezies feeling that marrying Dr Menezies is the only option left. "What I am to do? Only a doctor could love this body" (14).

Angela's social position as a Bangladeshi refugee, despite the fact that she is adopted by Brandons, and the delicate issue of making them shelling out several thousand dollars for her further studies, make her vulnerable to the exploits of Dr. Menezies. This is the dark side of human beings whether Western or Eastern. Those who are immune to the woes of others do not hesitate to take advantage to fulfil their desires or realize their dreams.

Delia, Sister Stella and Mrs. Grimlund, the nurse in the hospital, impress upon Angela that she is saved by providence. Angela too believes in Grace and feels that she should repay the debt by serving the less privileged. With this spiritual aim, she rises above the common folks of her age and establishes contact with the Divine.

"The Lady from Lucknow", set in Atlanta, Georgia, is the story of an India born Pakistani immigrant who misinterprets freedom for licentiousness and emancipation for extra marital relationship. Disturbed by the taboos imposed on women in patriarchal communities, Nafeesa Hafeez looks for opportunities to violate the social norms which she believes are imposed to rob the independence of women. Her rebellious nature has its roots during her childhood in Lucknow where Husseina, the girl next door falls in love with a Hindu boy and is beaten to death by her father and her mother justifies the action of her husband stating that he has no other option. To them family honour is more valuable than their daughter's life.

Deeply moved by the fate of the girl, Hafeez considers the girl, a symbol for true love. Her empathy with the girl is so intense that memories of Husseina continue to haunt her even after their family's move to Rawalpindi after partition. At the age of 17, she marries Iqbal, an IBM executive and the son of a well known poet and lawyer in Islamabad. Along with her husband

she resides in Lebanon, Brazil, Zambia and France before moving to USA. Hafeez finds USA as the most congenial place to make adventures, to free her self from the shackles of patriarchal strictures. She considers that American society offers all the freedom a woman craves for, a place full of opportunities for forging connections with men of her choice. Iqbal's perception is different. He warns her against American men. "Americans are crazy for sex, you know that" (17).

Hafeez thinks that adultery is quite common in American societies. "Adultery in my house is probably no different, no quieter, than in other houses in this neighbourhood" (23).

By having a relationship with 65 year old Dr James Beamish, an American, Hafeez feels fascinated and adventurous. It is clear that Dr Beamish's attitude towards her is casual. To impress him before meeting him for the first time in her house, she buys a new front closing bra and silky new underwear. He does not bother about his attire at all. He wears "an old T. Shirt and lemon-pale boxer shorts" (Mukherjee 30).

To him Hafeez is just a mistress of less significance. After all, she is a coloured woman yearning to have a connection with a white man of high social status. Dr Beamish's wife knows pretty well her husband's motives and interests, and she insults Hafeez when she finds her in her bedroom by not taking her relationship with her husband a serious affair. Hafeez feels humiliated and defeated.

Anthony Boxill observes "In Western countries freedom of opportunity and expression for women is often merely illusory, and to come to America in pursuit of this illusion is to find oneself disconnected from the reality of the new society, and at the same time cut off from the support of the old culture" (46).

The story "Nostalgia" is set in New York, and addresses the problems of immigrants who believe that they are fully assimilated into American culture. They too sometimes suffer from bouts of nostalgic memories, and some of them in their attempt to reconnect to their roots opt for mean and crazy ways, and there are instances where immigrants try to exploit fellow immigrants. Diasporic tensions do not always unite immigrants.

Dr Manny Patel is a psychiatric resident, and an American schizophrenic calls him a "Paki scum." Disturbed by the racially prejudiced comment, Dr. Patel becomes nostalgic, recollects his student days, his decision to settle in USA, his marriage with a white American and his responsibilities towards his aged parents. He feels a

tug in his heart as he is sure that he does not love his parents as much as they love him. Though Dr. Patel maintains cordial relations with the fellow Indian doctors in the hospital professionally, he does not socialize with immigrants of Indian origin much. "When he had married he burned his India Society membership card" (Mukherjee 90). This willful disassociation from his community for a long time, and the sudden nostalgic feelings might have driven him crazy when he accidentally comes across a beautiful Indian sales girl in Manhattan.

Adultery is not new to Dr. Patel who distances himself from the ethos of India. He dates with Padma, unaware that she is a prostitute, and she and her pimp are trying to hook him and blackmail him. There are tons of decent ways to reconnect oneself to the lost world, to the world of one's origin. Christine Gomez observes, "In this story, the expatriate element of nostalgia is exposed as a weakness, a chink in Dr Patel's immigrant armour" (138).

The story "Saints" focuses on an adolescent who lives in the world of fantasies as he negotiates his identity in American space of fragile relationships. Shawn, the 15 year old son of Dr. Manny Patel and Camille places himself in the liminal space even though his mother is a white American. "Farelli wants to charge the club four-fifty an hour for tutoring. He's the only real American in the club. The rest of us have names like Sato, Chin, Duoc, Cho and Prasad. My name's Patel, Shawn Patel" (128).

His parent's marriage is a wreck, and he lives with his mother in upstate New York. His relationship with his father is restricted to occasional gifts and fat cheques. He does not miss his father much, but his heart beats for his mother. He is aware of the liberal sexual relationships, and his attitude towards his mother's boyfriends is casual. However the behaviour of Wayne Latta, her mother's new boyfriend hurts him as he knows that the relationship will bring agony to his mother. His inability to console her frustrates him. "I bleed. Mom should have had a daughter. Two women could have consoled each other. I can only think of Wayne, how even now he's slipping the loops over Serbian toggles. It's a complicated feeling. I bleed because I'm disloyal" (130).

When Shawn reads the book on Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, sent by his father, he wants to become a visionary like the saint. He fantasizes, and in the dead of the night, he wears his mother's clothes and moves out to Batliwala's house after consulting the telephone directory for an Indian name. He peeps into the house and

empathizes with the son of Batliwala. He considers him a fellow saint and wants to reach out to him. Shawn's transvestism can be traced to his deep rooted agony for his inability to console his mother.

When he returns home he hears his mother ordering Wayne to get out of the house but his mother's agony no more hurts him, he does not feel the pain though he hears her sobs as he believes that he is in trance, like the saint and he is in a state of transcendence beyond the states of pleasure and pain. "Love and pain: in the saint's mind there is no separation" (133).

Mukherjee portrays the misery of an adolescent boy in the world of emptiness where relationships have no commitment.

P.A Abraham observes, "The stories do not give any solutions for the problems faced by these expatriates. They just point out certain crucial moments in their lives and that moment is indeed a moment of revelation or as James Joyce who was also an expatriate called it 'epiphany.'"

#### Notes

1. Gwyn Kirk (born in UK in 1945) and Margo Okazawa-Rey (born in Japan 1949) in their work, *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspectives* (2004) analyze the factors that shape and reshape our identities. Both these women work in USA as teachers and are well known for their writings and lectures. According to them identity formation is the result of a complex interplay among a range of factors: individual decisions and choices, particular life events, community recognition and expectations, societal categorization, classification and socialization, and key national or international events. It is an ongoing process that involves several key questions:

Who am I? Who do I want to be?

Who do others think I am and want me to be?

Who and what do societal and community institutions, such as schools, religious institutions, the media, and the law say I am?

Where/what/ who are my "home" and "community"?

Which social group(s) do I want to affiliate with?

Who decides the answers to these questions, and on what basis?

2. Southern Cross represents four bright stars which depict the cross. Star gazers can see the pattern of the stars all year around in the southern hemisphere. It is not visible in the northern hemisphere.

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