



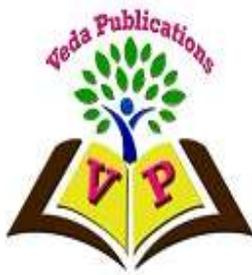
PERUSAL OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES IN CLARK BLAISE AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S *DAYS AND NIGHTS IN CALCUTTA*

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ABSTRACT



Diasporic writers use different lens to observe their experiences about the same place. One can face romantic light at one place while for other it offers nothing but disillusionment. One can overcome crisis of his identity at one place, while for other same place can question his very existence. The present study analyses two different perspectives of Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee about India and Canada in their collaborative memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. On the one hand, Blaise gives up his American citizenship to become Canadian, on the other hand, for Mukherjee, Canada remains a land promoting racial discrimination against Asian immigrants. This memoir takes into account their one year stay in India and here Blaise comprehends true picture of his Canada in the similar vein as Mukherjee gets a changed version of her home country.

Keywords: *Home, Diaspora, Racial Discrimination, Multiculturalism, Mosaic, Hyberdity.*

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Bharati Mukherjee is counted among expatriate writers like V.S. Naipaul and American writers like Bernard Malamud and Henry Roth. Her fictional and nonfictional writings consist of autobiographical tone. Whatsoever migrant experiences she has faced in her life, same get reflected in her works as her life has been the life of journeys. She enjoys privileged position not only as an Indian Diaspora writer but also as Indo-American writer as Clark Blaise says, "Bharati has become one of America's best known novelists and short-story writers..." (*Days and Nights in Calcutta*, xii). By rejecting her status as an Asian American or Indo American, she denies her hyphenated identity as she tells in an interview with Nicholas Basbanes, "I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here..." (qtd. in Kuortti, 88). Bharati's husband and writer Blaise was born to the French- Canadian father and English-Canadian mother in US in 1940. Though he was an American of Canadian origin, he gave up his American citizenship to become Canadian in 1973 as he found Canada far better than US where he could end up his identity crisis while for Mukherjee, Canada offers less romantic version.

Bharati has written two works of non-fiction, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Her nonfictional works are written in collaboration with Clark Blaise who has also authored *A North American Education* (stories), novels like *Lust*, *Linear Attractions* etc. Her memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* recounts her life's journey from one phase to other. As she writes, "My life, I now realize, falls into three disproportionate parts. Till the age of eight I lived in the typical joint family, indistinguishable from my twenty cousins, indistinguishable, in fact, from an eternity of Bengali Brahmin girls. From eight till twenty-one we lived as a single family, enjoying for a time wealth and confidence. And since twenty-one I have lived in the West. Each phase required a repudiation of all previous avatars; an almost total rebirth(179).

She wrote *Days and Nights in Calcutta* in Canada. In the original contract, its manuscript was called 'The Bengali Journals' which was a simple record of two people going to India, later on Bharati realized that it was an account of her life's history and finally they named it as *Days and Nights in Calcutta* and it was the time when image of India was frozen for Bharati in many aspects. In the screenplay of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, Bharati and Blaise are portrayed as characters of Lela and Colin and Lela's discarding of her lover is similar to her discarding of India. In this memoir, India is portrayed from both Eastern and Western perspectives. It explores the cultural tensions implicit in the life of Bharati who returns to her native land as a Canadian citizen after 14 years' gap. Bharati's husband Blaise also tries to comprehend the culture and political tensions of India. In lieu of reconciling his western self with India, Blaise tries to attempt to reconcile India with his western self. He remains confused regarding the true image of India and time and again repeats the question, "If I want to understand India, where do I look..." (52). Similarly, Bharati on subconscious plain, seems to ask, "If I want to understand myself, where do I look?" If in case of Bharati, this relocation assures the righteousness of her decision to leave India for Canada. Here, she is confronted with a question that if she can be reintegrated into Indian Culture? In her 1995 epilogue, she confirms this decision, that her autobiography is not solely a story of a homecoming, but a story of coming to terms with her decision to settle among hostile neighbours. This memoir was first published by Doubleday in 1977. Here two independent narratives are juxtaposed, the first narrative consists of Blaise's point of view as a western coping with the unfamiliar Indian traditions and patterns, the second half of the memoir is told from Mukherjee's point of view adjusting with the differences found in India from 14 years ago to the present day India of 1973. She also questions what have happened if she had stayed in India. In the 1995 American paperback edition by Hungry Mind Press, a new prologue by Blaise and a new epilogue by Mukherjee add their additional perspectives on their visit to India two decades before. In epilogue, Mukherjee tells, "I write to



discover ideal worlds so that I may live to repair ruined ones" (301).

The title of the memoir *Days and Nights in Calcutta* seems to derive from the film of Satyajit Ray's *Aranyer Din Ratri/ Days and Nights in the Forest*, which is about the four stages i.e four *ashramas*, a Hindu must follow in the course of his life as defined in Hindu scriptures, which "held that a member of the three higher classes should retire (at some point of his life...) with or without his wife, to the forest to devote himself to spiritual contemplation." ("Hinduism", 520). In this memoir, Calcutta seems to replace the forest, making it a modern site where Blaise and Mukherjee get the reflection of their lives, their own selves. The two narratives can be understood by the term 'orientalism' which is the depiction of Eastern societies' culture by western writers. The word Orientalism traces back to Latin word *oriens* means "east" which is in contestation with Occident, i.e the West.

Born in an upper middle class Bengali family in Kolkata in 1940, when Bharati was about 7-8 years old, her father left India along with his family for London and it was the first displacement for Bharati and this was the time when she started forgetting Bengali and acquiring English, "It was a time of forgetting Bengali and acquiring English until I reached an absolute equilibrium"(182). Later on, they moved to Basel due to her father's research and ultimately they relocated Calcutta in 1951. The violence witnessed by Bharati helped her to remake herself. The labor violence and unrest was taking place in communist Calcutta and she being the daughter of a very wealthy factory owner had encountered it but she calls this violence as a way to remake oneself. In 1959, they moved to Baroda due to her father's job in pharmaceutical division of the Sarabhai Chemical Complex. In 1961, Bharati left India for USA to join writer's workshop at Iowa and met Clark Blaise who she married later. When Mukherjee was in Iowa, her father wrote to her about a perfect groom 'nuclear physicist' a perfect match, but in the meantime, she met Blaise and thought for marriage. In Mukherjee's words, "If I had married that man- who is now very important in the Indian nuclear industry- I would have been a very

different kind of person and a different kind of writer. I would have written elegant, ironic, wise stories which would be marked by detachment"(Steinberg, 35).

After her marriage to Blaise, she relocated to Canada in 1966 and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. She spent here 14 years and suffered the pangs of migration and racial discrimination as Mukherjee says, "The first ten years into marriage, years spent mostly in my husband's native Canada. I thought of myself as an expatriate Bengali, permanently stranded in North America because of destiny or desire." (*The New World Reader*,35). She felt like 'visible minority' and an 'invisible woman' here. Mukherjee's works like *Wife, Darkness*, "An Invisible Woman", and *The Sorrow and the Terror* are the outcomes of her racial experience in Canada, where she was demeaned and was on the verge of being a "housebound, fearful, aggrieved, obsessive, and unforgiving queen of bitterness"(Alam, 10). In an essay, "An Invisible Woman", she says about it: "One said, "If you didn't play in snow as a child you have no right to regard yourself as a Canadian"(Steinberg,35). Mukherjee and Blaise both had faced death threats like Rushdie when they published their 1985 book *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Due to maltreatment in Canada, the couple migrated to USA in 1980 and became its citizens willingly. She calls this step, "a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration."(Mukherjee,"Introduction to *Darkness*", 3).

It is this contagious and brash racism which futile the attempts of migrants to claim a home in the mainstream space of the host country. Here, concept of ambivalence or hybridity is excelled by the concept of multiculturalism. Bhabha expounds, "Multiculturalism policy entertains and encourages cultural diversity (while correspondingly) containing it. A transport norm is constituted, a norm given by the lost host society or dominant culture, which says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid" ("The Third Space", 208). The bewixt and interstitial space that these margins create, results into the new narratives of national and cultural identity. Multiculturalism engages one in the practice of continuous remaking.



Contrary to the conventional perspectives of diaspora linked with a state of pain and dispossessions, Bharati reconfigures the idea of diaspora as a process of gain. Though, when she favors American culture, Indian critics and reviewers take this issue as portrayal of Indian culture and traditions in negative color merely to get benefits of Americanization. Her characters can also be seen as craving for homeland but with no desire for permanent return. As Mukherjee had crossed and recrossed multiple borders of race, history, language, culture etc. which made her think that one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Emigration accompanies with it erosions and accretions. Her views can be supported to "rehousement", a process that entails "breaking away from the culture into which one was born, and in which one's place in society was assured" and "re-rooting oneself in a new culture" (Hancock 39). Though migrants are treated as margins and minors in hostland still they possess the caliber to challenge the linear and homogeneous nationalist narratives.

With the passage of time, migrants get political or legal citizenship, but to get cultural citizenship remain a problematic task. As scholar Katharyne Mitchell asserts, "although immigrants may become legal citizens through a prescribed, state-regulated path, immigrants become cultural citizens only through a reflexive set of formative and locally constructed processes" (Mitchell, 229). The cultural anthropologist Renato Rosaldo opines that cultural citizenship provides rights to minority and subordinated groups so that they could be different from the mainstream but still belong to the nation.

The concept of multiculturalism differs across the national boundaries of Canada and the US. Though, the Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau implemented the official policy of multiculturalism in Canada in 1971 to accommodate and respect the cultural plurality of different ethnic migrant groups, yet it failed on practical grounds as illustrated by Mukherjee in her work *The Sorrow and the Terror*. Here, it is shown that 300 Canadian passengers of South Asian ancestry were killed in the terrorist attack on the Air India plane in 1985. This tragedy clearly shows that Canadian citizens having Indian ancestry are not deemed legitimate Canadians there

and thus obstructing them in accessing the full membership of the nation, so there is need to reconceptualize the definition of Canadian citizenship. But for Blaise, Canada was a solution to his identity crisis as he was a French- Canadian by name. Canada seemed to him a place where he belonged to. Though for him Canada is a land of prospectus, he slowly realizes, it did not lend a helping hand to his wife as a writer as Bharati was refused to sell her US published books here; she was not invited to attend Canadian Writers' Union. If Canada could not lend support to Bharati, it was a problem of all Asian descent writers there as Blaise calls it, "a problem faced by all writers in the Commonwealth who lack a sufficient 'home audience' how to be true to your material and still make it accessible. How to make it accessible without turning unnecessarily mystical, didactic, or condescending" (qtd in Narasimhaiah, 122).

Contrary to "mosaic" experience in Canada, Mukherjee experiences "melting pot" in America. Melting pot refers to the fusion of diverse elements to form a new entity. The word "melting" traces back to the 18th century when St. Jean de Crevecoeur talked about the American as 'the new man' being 'melted into a new race of men.' Though, this term gained popularity when the Anglo-Jewish writer, Israel Zangwill referred to the melting of cultural differences into a new race of "Americans" sharing a common culture. This is American's concept of melting pot, according to Mukherjee that challenges the concept of fixed, static national identity. By rejecting the tag of Asian-American or Indo-American, she participates in a counter-hegemonic move. As Bharati said in an interview, "America represented a kind of glitziness...a chance for romantic reincarnation, whereas moving to Canada was like going to England, a step backward to an old world, a hierarchical society" (Connel, 11).

Mukherjee's concept of American multiculturalism echoes Homi Bhabha's concept of 'third space' where diverse elements come across and transmute one another. As Bhabha says, "Such negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration" but such negotiation provides a meaning to the ethnic culture within the dominant culture ("Culture's In-Between" 58). Mukherjee's



recontextualization of American melting pot's concept destabilizes the power relations between 'margins' and 'center'. On the one hand, the migrants fail to escape from the effect of dominant culture, on the other hand, the latter also gets transformation as Jaggi says, "I am saying we haven't come to accommodate or to mimic; we have changed ourselves, but we have also come to change you" (Jaggi 9). Thus the presence of new migrants also shapes and moulds the mainstream culture. But this concept of melting pot is not easy as within the heteroglossia of cultures, histories, experience, there also lay prejudice, confusions and tension.

They stay in India for a year. While Blaise's narrative is a kind of quest, a kind of travel writing, Mukherjee's narrative is close to autobiography. The difference in their view point is based on difference in their culture and civilization, in which they were reared. As Arun Mukherjee says in *Oppositional Aesthetics*, "Contrary to the assertions of the liberal humanist critics, literary appreciation as well as literary production are culture based..." (Mukherjee, 26). For example, instead of the quest, the main motif of Indian epics is exile. The characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata go to the forest against their will, in obedience to the command of the parents in the first one and as a punishment for having lost at gambling in the second. On the similar lines, Bharati seems to project her double exile, the one she is facing now in India (a land which she finds alien now), the other in Canada as she says, "Going to India was Clark's idea", at the same time readers feel that as she wants to say that going to Canada was also Clark's choice. No doubt, Mukherjee had left India and its male dominated patriarchal society, still she remained conscious for her peers' condition in Calcutta as she says, "I was witnessing a non-American definition of women's liberation. These few women were successful and ambitious, but like Sita of the Hindu legends, their virtue was demonstrated in the service of their husbands" (213). Now India keeps less charm for Mukherjee and she is happy not to lead the life as Anjali, Rina, Kamali, Anju or Nirmal are leading in India where life choices of women are limited and that's why she doesn't regret for her decision to flee India, "I realized that for me there would be no more

easy consolation through India....I would return, of course, but in future visits India would become just another Asian country with too many agonies and too much passion, and I would be another knowledgeable but desolate tourist" (297).

This shows that her decision to flee was a decision of practical preference as she found herself unable to adjust with India's cultural complexity. Her characters too seem to follow the same line of unfolding shock and surprises for readers. It comes as a surprise for readers when she presents an Asian woman raises her voice or breaks the shackles of oppression and makes a place in the world of economic freedom of America. Her narrative is culminated with some brave words, "What died, that year in India, was my need for easy consolation. What has survived is the stubbornness to go on" (299).

Blaise's visit to India helped him comprehending the institution of his marriage, Indian culture and traditions and the future of India. Blaise sets on a mission to comprehend real India. He starts loving India from the old market in Bombay, "This is where I began to love it...India alerted me again to the basic social value, buying and selling- knowing goods and providing goods- the original reason that people came together" (17). For Blaise, Bombay market is a metaphor of social bonds. Though, the mob of India seems to him unpleasant and he and Bharati take shelter in the Ramakrishna mission. Though, Blaise observed the rural world and the related problem of poverty as a part of 'another India' but in reality such things don't make another India, rather real India because such things are at the core of public discourses, as Robert Stern avers in *Changing India*, "In India's constitution...hundreds of its party manifestoes, thousands of its laws and myriad speeches of its politicians, there is rhetorical committed to a process of change whose beneficiaries are the poor" (19).

He struggles with the mode of understanding India, that whether it can be comprehended from a point of view of Marx, or that of Hegel? In fact he wants to comprehend India from a western's point of view. Blaise's attempt to vision India through the Marxist or Hegelian lens shows that he is a good citizen of Canada and against the



aggressive foreign policy of USA. He finds Canada as a helping hand to third world countries like India as Daniel Coleman and Goellnicht says, "All discriminatory laws against Asian immigrants were repealed by midcentury, and the 1967 Immigration Act 'liberalized' immigration from Third World countries, thus leading to a rapid increase in radicalized minority populations, especially in Canada's large urban centers, during the next decade...to carve out for Canada an international role distinguished from those of the old European colonizers and from that of modern US imperialism, Canada as champion of the Third World"(9-22). He feels that India will have to follow the footsteps of west for progressing ahead, "I think there is a probably no short cut. India must undergo the same long process that we did in the West, the gradual proletarianization of lumpen refugees off the land. Then the creation of proletarian personality that will be less class-conscious, less religious, less family dependent, and thoroughly self-centered" (120)

Though he talks about the failure of his vision about India after 21 years when he wrote prologue of *Days and Nights in Calcutta* in 1995, "More than ever, India seems poised for rupture, yet the nightmare future that was so easy to predict twenty-one years ago never materialized, at least not in the dramatic form I'd expected. India is poor and fragile, but it is also rich and robust; the problems have always been the unequal distribution of wealth and the disparities between urban and village economies. It must be understood that India has the largest middle class in the world" (xii).

Actually Blaise's quest was, as Mary-Louise Pratt says, "the ideological project of third worldism and white supremacy" (*Imperial Eyes*, 220). His neutral attitude shows his kindness for India but he could never escape himself from following his white man's eyes. Visiting India, also gave chance to Blaise to understand his wife and his marriage. He tries to understand what made her wife to settle in North America and to quit India. He finds that foreign provides much freedom and opportunities to writers and under this line; he misjudges Calcutta's newspaper editor's sayings about unoriginality of Chattopadhyaya's life in Calcutta.

The journey through India was not less than any pilgrimage for Blaise as in the beginning, we find him physically and spiritually exhausted, "Last year, between December and April...I had nearly died. Perhaps, in that metaphorical way that is more real to me than any injury, I did die...I became, in fact as well as in imagination, disaster-prone"(4). After meeting with a number of misfortunes in Canada like his fall on ice, burning of his house, an accident etc. which made him to set on a journey to India along with his wife and it was in India where Blaise was healed and restored. According to him, visit to India will bring transformation in him, "I too had yearned for transformation in the year to come. I would shed my "learning", gather my humanism about me, trust my eyes and ears, and diligently search for caves to be reborn in....I must have thought our marriage would deepen, grew even stronger"(138). Though he tries to comprehend India during this one year stay, but in reality he gets the true picture of Canada here in the same way as while living in Canada one gets meaning of home of India.

CONCLUSION

To sum up it can be said that Bharati Mukherjee and Blaise encountered different experiences and portrayed these in different colors because of their rearing in different cultures. It was the impact of racialism in Canada that shed the image of it in Bharati's eyes and she drew towards the kind reception of US. It was this migrancy which ultimately made her home in India as less romantic. While Blaise white color and his nationality of Canada helped her to set an identity there and he observed the Indian side from the same lens of west.

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