

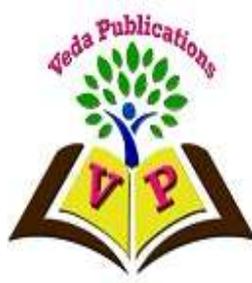


THEMES OF ALIENATION, EXPATRIATION AND IMMIGRATION AND IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE SHORT STORIES OF BHARATHI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT



In modern art and literature, the theme alienation is often explored to focus on the individual's feelings of alienness towards the society, the family and towards himself. Sometimes this alienness becomes worse or pathological through a confrontation with the foreign culture. The dictionary meaning of the word 'alienation' is to make hostile where previously friendship had existed. Therefore, in the case of the expatriate this would imply a sort of hostile distancing from the homeland as well as from the adopted country. In the case of the writers, the style and content of their writings have been greatly influenced by the extent to which they have been able to identify and adapt to their surroundings. As Gurbhagat Sigh says, "Expatriate writing in its theory and practice, is the work of the exile who has experienced unsettlement at the existential, political and metaphysical levels. With this experience, he/she has unsettled the philosophical and aesthetic systems." [1] The feeling of alienation in their adapted country makes them write about people and events typical of their country. So those who have been able to 'identify' with their new host country are blessed with bi-cultural perceptions that enable them to write from a wider and more exciting angle. The word 'identity' means 'to identify, 'to become identical' which means becoming the same as or essentially alike. According to Stainslaw Barnezak, the word "Exile" and "Expatriate" and "emigrant" are sad prefixes that conjure "state of exclusion" [2]. The expatriate lives on his ex status while the immigrant celebrates his present in the new country and tries to establish well in his host country.

Keywords: Alienation, Expatriation, Assimilation, Immigration, Identity Crisis.

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INTRODUCTION

In the stories of Bharati Mukherjee, all the protagonists are the expatriates and immigrants to Canada and U.S.A. In her stories, the theme of alienation and expatriation is predominant and vigorous. In almost all the stories of *Middleman* and other stories and *Darkness* Bharati Mukherjee writes mainly about Asian immigrants in North America and Canada. The two volumes explore in various ways the themes of expatriation alienation and immigration. In the introduction to the stories of *Darkness* she says,

"I had thought of myself in spite of a white husband and two assimilated sons, an expatriate. In my fiction and in my Canadian experience, 'immigrants were lost souls, put upon and pathetic. Expatriates, on the other hand, knew all too well who and what they were, and what foul fate had befallen them'".[3]

Mukherjee always considers expatriation as a self-defeating attitude in a writer and the expatriate writer makes a complaint, tries to express the pain of exile, and always seeks refuge in solitude. The expatriates always never feel comfortable both in the native and alien lands. They always undergo an important change in the process of assimilation and it does not mean that they are denied of their past but they let loose of their past in the process of assimilation, the rigid hold of the past gradually fades away. In other words, it is a recognition of 'fluid identity'. Mukherjee says in her introduction to *Darkness*, about her identity as an Indian that, "as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration....but saw a set of fluid identities to be celebrated"[4]

The three stories which depict the theme of expatriation are "The World According to Hsu", "Isolated Incidents", and "Hindu." According to her, they are "uneasy stories about expatriation" In the story, "The third story "Hindus" though set in America Mukherjee juxtaposes an expatriate against an immigrant and brings out the contrast quite vividly. The protagonist of the story Leela Lahiri represents Mukherjee's concept of an immigrant's identity. She proudly calls herself as an American Citizen and at the same time, she feels proud of her Bengali Brahmin ancestral identity of the past.

Another protagonist H.R.H Maharajah of Gotlah is an expatriate with undue grievance against India, as the India Government has ceased his whole property. When both meet after two years of gap, the Maharaja tells Leela that he is leading his life by selling his memoirs, but Leela celebrates her new identity as an immigrant by accepting her dual existence.

"Angela" is another story, which tells us about an immigrant from Bangladesh who can only dream of love, domesticity, babies and all the comforts that a doctor's wife can possibly enjoy in the new world. Angela is a regular visitor to the hospital to serve Delia who has been recovering from a surgery. On her way to the room, she meets Dr Vinny Menezines, who is middle aged and a prospective, successful and respectable Indian immigrant who wants to marry her. Angela decides to join the personal department to serve the orphans. Unfortunately, she finds the doctor with her friend in her bed. She feels desperate and her hope to marry the doctor is shattered. In almost all the stories of the volume of stories "Darkness" depict the theme of alienation expatriation and immigration.

In 1988, Mukherjee was awarded The National Critics Circle Award for Fiction for *The Middleman* and other stories. She becomes the middleman linking both the worlds. She narrates her stories from many points of view with a shrewd eye for the concept of self within a large society. The characters in this volume are adventurers, explorers rather than refugees and outcasts, and they try hard to become a part of a new, changing America.

Expatriation, alienation, and assimilation are the predominant themes of her second volume of stories, *The Middleman* and other stories. In this volume, she says about the universal truth. C. Sen Gupta rightly comments,

Foreign culture is not an impediment in a person's coming to terms with oneself. At best, it works as a catalyst. She also has the courage of conviction to point out that an alienated psyche will find itself estranged anywhere in the world, America, Uganda, Trinidad or for that matter even in India, because alienation here is a part of the protagonist's mental makeup.[5]



Mukherjee in this volume becomes the explorer of the new world; she believes that the new world forces one to know what one really wants. Uma Parameswaran rightly says of Mukherjee's exploration of America,

Usually expatriate writers do not write too much about their adopted country, as it is very difficult to get behind the actuality of the mind of a new country. It takes a particular kind of eye for detail to do this and to make it look authentic... Mukherjee has done a believably commendable job in this remarkable collection of short stories.[6]

In the story "The Middleman" in a straight forward way she spins the tale of the middleman, Alfie Judah, who provides people anything they need, without any fuss and sentimentally. He is the middleman narrator, who having listened to bad advice, 'with bad associates is under the 'extradition' but hopes to make it back'. He makes his living out of the rough-and tumble world of smuggler. "Me? I make a living from the things that fall. The big fat belly of Clovis I Ransom bobs above me like whale."[7]

The story is set in Central America where the middleman, Alfie Judah has been involved in a guerrilla war. Mukherjee is well acquainted with the language of the common people in Central America. Therefore, quite easily she depicts violence, sex, and gangster activities. The middleman, a Jewish, also an expatriate, tries to be assimilated in America.

In the second story "A Wife's Story" Mukherjee introduces the Indian protagonist who has left her husband to America to take her Ph.D. Mrs. Panna Bhatt has adapted herself so well to the social and cultural milieu of America that she feels light almost free and the thought of alienation from her country never bothers her. Moreover, her expatriation was the outcome of her own choice; it was not thrust on them, though not always pleasurable i.e. rising to their desired expectations in her host country. She writes,

"It is the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First, you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you are funny. Then you are disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity... I long, at

times for clear-cut answers. Offer me instant dignity today, and I'll take it I long for ugly range".[8]

Mukherjee like her protagonist Panna is trained to behave well with dignity though she simmers inwardly because she thinks that her situation back at home would have been different from her position in America. It doesn't mean that she is safe. She has not been under the control of herself and she has faced so many riots, uprooting, and separation.

Panna Patel has become so free and assimilated that we find a kind of rebellion against the traditional bondage of Hindu wife, who must always dress full and are only the tastes of her husband. She has broadened her horizons. She can even think of winking back at the cops when they 'smile at her with benevolence'(M.36).in contrast she wants them into trouble, wants to break into dance. But her Indian culture asserts it as 'silly'. In her own words, "My parents, with the help of a marriage broker, who was my mother's cousin, picked out a groom. All I had to do was get to know his taste in food."[9]

She seeks a safety harbour in America and there is no going back to India. She says,

I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I have left home, my husband, to get a Ph.D in specialized. I have a multiple entry visa and a small scholarship for two years. After that, we'll see.[10]

Alienation from her country has given her an opportunity to find a new self that has been set free from the bondages of Indian traditions and meaningless suppression of the marriage system. The other stories in this volume, Fathering, Jasmine, Danny's Girls, Buried Lives also depict the themes of alienation, expatriation, immigration.

CONCLUSION

Thus almost all the protagonists of Bharathi Mukherjee, in her two volumes of short stories deal with the theme of alienation expatriation and immigration and identity crisis in their new countries. They are the Asian immigrants to North America and Canada. Mukherjee had experienced racial discrimination in Canada and she depicts it in her stories. She always considers expatriation a self defeating attitude in a writer and the expatriate writer tries to express the pain of exile and always



seeks refuge in solitude. The expatriates never feel comfortable both in the native and alien lands. They always experience some change or the other in the process of assimilation and it does not mean that they are denied of their past but they let themselves lose their past in the process of assimilation and the rigid hold of the past gradually fade away.

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