

COGNIZANCE OF MULTICULTURALISM IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVELS

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Women writers constitute a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. They have their own concerns, priorities as well as their own ways of dealing with the predicament of their women protagonist. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian Diaspora who have achieved fortunate positions within a comparatively short creative period. She contributes of her to the field of fiction writing with a special emphasis on her diasporic experience in her works.

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, to an upper-middle class Hindu- Bengali Brahmin family in Calcutta, India. Within a short span, Mukherjee published seven fictional works, two short story collections, a non-fictional work and some literary essays. Her fictional works include *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), and *The Tree Bride* (2004).

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee have been much acclaimed for their depiction of immigrant experiences in America. Her novels throw special light on the plight of Asian immigrants who come to America from totally different cultural backgrounds and try to survive against overwhelming odds. These immigrants are shown in Mukherjee's American culture due to their different cultural origin and ethnic identity. Mukherjee's world of immigrants and their desperate need to belong to the new world bring a sense of cross-cultural adventure to her novels. Her immigrants, since they come from an Asian or non-European background, undergo experiences somewhat dissimilar to those of European immigrants in the past. For those European immigrants in early America, the challenge posed by the new world lay mostly in its totally different material conditions, what they needed most was to build a civilization out of the wilderness that confronted them. The Asian immigrants of America in the twentieth century are, however, confronted with a different set of conditions that pose a new kind of challenge and adventure. The colliding worlds of their exile and immigration also generate a number of psychological anomalies that merge into one another to form a curious blend of cross-cultural consciousness that can be measured only by its own ability to survive, succeed and change.

This article shows how Mukherjee's experience of and position in diaspora that enable her cultural productions to map a site that reconfigures the leading discourse of multiculturalism. By reading of her works and an unpacking of her terminology reveal that Mukherjee has not been wholly uncritical of dominant ideologies in her literary and cultural imagining of the American nation. While Mukherjee's professed identity affiliations in the public forum as well as the aesthetic and ideological value of the type of writing. She is engaged in may be heavily invested in her new homeland of America, where they have helped her gain a measure of

success, her literary discourse on multiculturalism does engage with the complexities of national narratives to offer a cognizance that moves beyond a simple acceptance of dominant definitions of national and cultural identity.

The fiction of Bharati Mukherjee offer a challenge to the dominant paradigms of Canadian and US multiculturalisms through their implicit call for more fluid or provisional frameworks for the construction of cultural and national identities. The particular issues which give rise to the debates on multiculturalism differ across the national boundaries of Canada and the US, given the very different demographic and historical circumstances which have contributed to the distinctive character of each nation.

Mukherjee's differing experiences of diaspora in Canada and the US have influenced her and her literary productions, leading to imaginative, textual and cultural negotiations with and interpretations of dominant narratives which exemplify, through her stance on the discourse of national identity formation in both nations, an engagement beyond simplistic ways of dealing with or responding to multiculturalism, a charge often made against the author. Besides providing opportunities for contesting hegemonic narratives of national consolidation, the dynamics at work in the fictions gain some sense of the relationship that exists between cultural difference and national unity or identity. At the very least, by suggesting that it is something that can be negotiated and contested, they problematise for us the notion of multiculturalism. As Chelva Kanaganayakam admits:

The rhetoric and reality of multiculturalism, one should not forget that this too is a narrative of sorts, a discourse shaped by cultural and ideological needs.¹

Bharati Mukherjee writes about what she calls the cultural hybridization of the new America and explores, in violent and often grotesque contexts, aspects of the collisions between the Indian and American cultures. Mukherjee sets her texts against a background of intertwined, transnational economic activities and mass uprootings in the Third World. In her fiction, Mukherjee presents a new view of postmodern, globalized America, in which the notion of the Indian immigrant as global cosmopolitan adds a transformative element to American multiculturalism. She has developed an understated prose style and tells her story from many different cultural perspectives. As Angelika Bammer claims:

The separation of people from their native culture either through physical dislocation (as refugees, immigrants, migrants, exiles or expatriates) or by the colonizing impositions of a foreign culture ... is one of the most formative experiences of our century.²

Mukherjee's experience of racism in Canada that is primarily responsible for her cultivation of an attitude of 'self-protective irony'³ and expatriate aloofness in her early works. In *An Invisible Woman*, an early essay on the workings of Canadian racism and multiculturalism, Mukherjee highlights the paradoxes involved in her everyday experience of living in Canada as a woman rendered 'invisible', on a national and cultural level, by the colour of her skin, a key marker of her visibility as a non-European immigrant. In describing 'unhoused' phase of her life

in her memoirs, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, she articulates the anxiety stemming from ‘the absolute impossibility of ever having a home’⁴. In particular, Mukherjee identifies what she calls the virulent and unabashed racism inherent in the Canadian discourse of multiculturalism as having obstructed the attempts of ethnic citizens like her and her characters from staking a claim to a home in the mainstream spaces of the Canadian nation.

Mukherjee suggests that the liberal, state-sanctioned discourse of Canadian multiculturalism is underpinned by this very view of cultures as fixed and mutually impermeable. This conception of multiculturalism denies the presence of ambivalence or hybridity through its assertion of superficial pluralism and its belief in the existence of clear boundaries between cultures. In such a multicultural nation, differences are organized into neat, virtual grids of distinct ethnic communities, each with its own culture. Bhabha elaborates:

*Multicultural policy entertains and encourages cultural diversity, [while correspondingly] containing it. A transparent norm is constituted, a norm given by the 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.*⁵

Homi Bhabha and other cultural theorists view the new forms and configurations of identification of diaspora communities as provoking a dismantling of exclusionary narratives of the nation and of national policies such as multiculturalism. In his influential essay, Homi Bhabha contends:

*The nation's margins, to which diaspora and other minority communities are relegated, are highly complex and flexible recesses of cultural production from where various oppositional practices and analytic capacities can emerge. The space of betwixt and between, the margins constitute that interstitial space of overlap of cultures and histories, the very site from which new narratives of national and cultural identity can be written and imagined.*⁶

The situation of uprootedness faced by the new settlers in another county is not so very easy. When the immigrants come to settle in another county, they are faced with a new culture, a new set of rules and a hostile group of people who do not mix so very easily. Everyone does not have the capacity to adjust their feelings and mind.

*The situation faced by migrants who leave their own country to settle in a new one is basically the problem of learning to adapt to an unfamiliar Culture. This problem can be dramatic if the new culture is very different from the one they left.*⁷

The idea of national and cultural identity, Mukherjee's discourse of nationalism, as exemplified in her novels, opens up a space for a consideration of the notions of rupture, break

and dispersal, of the multiple, diverse, and heterogeneous subjectivities that form such a dominant concern in the dynamics of cultural citizenship. By reformulating the ‘mosaic’ and ‘melting pot’ tropes of multiculturalism into a concept of cultural citizenship, Mukherjee suggests how multiculturalism as a narrative of exclusion which demands a model of homogeneous people can be reconstituted into a view of multiculturalism as a discourse and practice in continuous remaking, representative of the routes of identification brought into play by diaspora.

Undoubtedly Mukherjee’s thematic range is limited, but within the premises of her themes, she has startled her readers with kaleidoscopic variety of issues she has raised in her novels. Her rich literary contribution deals with immigrant and expatriate experiences.

References :

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