

'A FATHER' AND 'FATHERING' BY BHARATI MUKHERJEE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Ambika Sharma

Ph.D Scholar

Assistant Professor in English, R. K. Arya College,
Nawanshahr. Punjab. INDIA. 144514

Dr. Tanu Gupta

Research Supervisor

Associate Professor, Department of Mathematics & Humanities
Maharishi Markandeshwar University,
Mullana, Ambala

ABSTRACT: *The literature of the Indian diaspora constitutes an important part of the burgeoning field of Anglophone post colonial literature. Diaspora is an emerging word in post colonial literary scenario. Its emergence has produced a radical transformation or 'paradigm shift' in literary and cultural studies. The Indian diasporic writers have attained popularity in the last decade because of the theoretical formulations generated by their works. These writers present a blend of culture of their native homeland and the culture of the host land. Diasporic literature helps in bridging the gaps between different countries, glocalizing the global and even in maintaining universal peace. The diasporic writings feature the quest for identity, uprooting and re rooting, insider and outsider syndrome, nostalgia, nagging sense of guilt etc. The process of survival of the diasporic individual involves the struggles and sufferings from "alienation" to "assimilation". Bharati Mukherjee is an India born Canadian /American writer. She immigrated from her native land i.e. India to USA. She lived in Canada for about fourteen years before finally moving to USA. Her stay in Canada witnessed racist attacks, which are very clearly depicted in her writings. The author of eight highly praised novels, two collections of short stories and a smattering of non-fiction, shows her personal experiences. An immigrant's life, full of pain, struggle, nostalgia, sense of belongingness, struggle for survival in the alien land, serves as the background of Bharati Mukherjee's writings. The paper aims to compare two of her short stories, "A Father" and "Fathering", extracted from her collections titled Darkness and The Middleman and Other Stories, respectively. The objective of this paper is to undertake diasporic perspective including the post colonial approach to achieve the objective.*

KEYWORDS: Diaspora, Postcolonial Theory, Alienation, Assimilation.

INTRODUCTION

Etymologically the word, "Diaspora" traces its history back to its Greek root. It is derived from the Greek word "Diaspeiro", literally means scattering or dispersion of people from their homeland. Diaspora has arrived as well as established itself as a distinct literary genre. Diasporic or expatriate writings explore the problems and experiences of migration and diasporic life. The diasporic writers not only write about their past but also write about their experiences in the alien land. This combination of nostalgia and reaction to the alien land lead

to a kind of hope for change of the alien land into a new homeland. Their background serves as the basis of their writings upon which it flourishes. These writers in their writings showcase the life of immigrants who are marginalized because they are not only immigrants but also they are minorities in sense of racial, linguistic and usually religious. The alienation of being an immigrants and the bitter stings of racism and the hard realities of day to day life, their native civilization and traditions are important factors in shaping their life. An immigrant always faces the challenge of to be challenged on the basis of discrimination, inequality, prejudices etc. in the new country.

The Indian women diasporic writers have achieved a status of recognition and appreciation for themselves in the literary world. Women diasporic writers like Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri have been nominated for or have won coveted literary awards such as the Booker's Prize, the Pulitzer Prize and the Orange Prize. Their works have been included in literary syllabi and have caused waves in many book clubs.

The present paper is an attempt to observe the comparative study of two of short stories written by Bharati Mukherjee, "A Father" and "Fathering". The paper is an attempt to analyze these two stories on the ground of similarities as well as disparities with regard to their background and also observing the critical aspect in the light of postcolonial critical theory.

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent writer among the first generation of immigrant writers. Presently she is an American citizen. She was born on July 27, 1940 in Calcutta, India. She did her post graduation in English and Ancient Indian Culture, from the University of Baroda and went to USA for doing M.F.A. She married to Clark Blaise, her colleague during M.F.A, who is also a writer. After marriage Bharati Mukherjee shifted to Canada and stayed there for almost fourteen years. Her stay in Canada left a deep impact on her mind. She faced racist attacks and discrimination in Canada which is reflected in her writings. Her diasporic concerns of an immigrant are portrayed in her novels- *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of The World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004), *Miss New India* (2011). She also has to her credit two collections of short stories- *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), for which she won National Book Circle Critics Award.

The first story undertaken in this paper is "A Father" extracted from *Darkness*. This story showcases a situation of conflict not among individuals only but also the conflict between superstition and reason. The father in this story, Mr. Bhowmick is an Indian Hindu, who is a staunch believer of Goddess Kali. He is unable to maintain a balance in his life between being a Hindu coming from India and his present life in America. Hinduism is a religion which is deeply indented in Indian culture and thus has a great impact on the mindset of Indian Hindus. Goddess Kali, according to Hinduism is a symbol of Shakti and is considered as a goddess of destruction and violence. In this story, the father, Mr. Bhowmick and his family including his wife, Mrs. Bhowmick and their daughter, Babli, hail from India and now settled in Detroit in North America. Mr. Bhowmick experiences the challenges in adapting to his new life in America. Mr. Bhowmick is predominantly an expatriate but his wife and his daughter have settled as immigrants in their new homeland. When he comes to know that his 26- year old daughter, Babli, an electrical engineer by profession, is pregnant through artificial insemination and not through natural way of conceiving, he is shocked. He is unable to lead a normal life

when his Indianness is slaughtered by the ways of the new world life. At the end of the story when there is confrontation between Mrs. Bhowmick and Babli regarding her way of getting pregnant, Mr. Bhowmick reacts violently and attacks his pregnant daughter with a rolling pin and Mrs. Bhowmick calls the police.

This story is written in Detroit, temporally as well as spatially. But it has India, in its background. Mr. Bhowmick's morning rituals of long prayers of goddess Kali, his way of brushing his teeth and the gurgling are symbols of his Indian way of life. He is such a firm believer of Goddess Kali that he experiences hallucinations which his American wife declares to be paranoia. He is superstitious unlike his wife and daughter. When his neighbour sneezes at the time of departure of Mr. Bhowmick for work, he doesn't dare to over rule the superstition and he retraces back to his home as a remedy. Nostalgia is visible in Mr. Bhowmick's recalling his mother's cooking, her shrine of goddess Kali built in Ranchi. He tries to dominate his wife by threatening her to beat with shoes, just like his father used to do in India. His attack on his unmarried pregnant daughter proves his obsession of being an Indian father. He could not reconcile completely to the wistful expatriate in himself with the immigrant, in his daughter. The 'politics of culture' as addressed by Edward Said in his deliberations on 'Orientalism' introduces the theory of migrant sensibility. According to Said, Cultural Politics is a component of location/space. Said argues that for an immigrant in the new land, there is always nostalgia for the native land that has its own rich tradition and relation which are to be forgotten in order to adapt the new culture. The immigrant is obliged to develop a sensibility which can be phrased as compromise, negotiation and assimilation.

The other story, "Fathering", is extracted from *The Middleman and Other Stories*. The collection is a brilliant display of cultural fusion in the midst of its birth pangs, yet glowing with the energy and exuberance of a society remaking itself. The stories in this collection centre on the immigrant experience of the new Americans coming from all over the world- Asia, Africa, West Indies. These immigrant according to Fakrul Alam writing in his study *Bharati Mukherjee* :

"are seen to be emerging from shadowy or marginal lives and putting out feelers to root themselves in a brave new world."

"Fathering" is a story of an American Vietnam veteran who is split between his past life in Vietnam and his present life in America. After the Vietnam war was over, Jason, the father in the story, tries to begin a new life for himself without the shadows of the Vietnam war by being "in marriage and fatherhood and teaching high school" (115). But the shadows from the past follow him in America. His girlfriend, Sharon, encouraged him to face his past but they are unable to cope up Eng's presence in their lives. Sharon doesn't like Eng and Eng is also distrustful of Sharon as well. Jason is sandwiched between Sharon and Eng. Sharon says in the doctor's office. "If you love me, send her back". (121). Eng reacts in similar way by stating, "She's bad, Dad. Send her back." (121). In the end, Jason chooses Eng over Sharon when he says : " My Saigon kid and me: we're a team" (122).

In the above discussed stories, both the fathers are presently living in America. On the one hand, Mr. Bhowmick is of Indian origin, an expatriate, but currently an American citizen. While Jason belongs to America only. Mr. Bhowmick has with him the cultural baggage of

India. He cannot uproot himself from his Indian roots though he tries to assimilate in the American culture but fails eventually. Sushma Tandon argues:

"The parents remain foreign, the children become American. Unbridgeable gulf is created between the two. Differences in taste, customs and language bring about domestic conflict" (p.14).

When he comes to know about his daughter who is pregnant through artificial insemination, he attacks her violently and this proves that though he has accepted his daughter's premarital pregnancy by an unknown person, as a part of his Americanization but he has not truly assimilated in the American culture to accept the bottle and syringe to get pregnant like animals. He cannot detach himself completely from his native culture. Being a father in this story, he doesn't support his daughter for forgetting her Indian culture. From the perspective of post colonialism in this story, Mr. Bhowmick represents the margins. Undoubtedly he lives in the centre of power but he criticizes the dominant centre. His daughter, Babli, is a true representative of the West. Mr. Bhowmick does not like his own daughter when he admits: "Babli was not the child he would have chosen as his only heir". (63). Mr. Bhowmick's reaction of attacking his pregnant daughter, symbolizes the revolt of the East against the West. Sudha Pandya rightly observes:

"... this is subtle depiction of the interactions, adjustment and sometimes conflict between two cultures and often between two generations of immigrants. The crisis out of these develops swiftly".

"Fathering", on the contrary, portrays an American father and his relation with his daughter, from the East. Though unwillingly and reluctantly, Jason supports his daughter, Eng. He tries to make her comfortable against Sharon's treatment for Eng. Finally, at Dr. Kearns place, he has to choose between Sharon and Eng and he chooses Eng. Eng's hysterical behavior at the doctor's office represents the culture and tradition of the marginals. Jason tries to calm Eng from her frenzy but he himself feels that his daughter is like an alien to him. He says. "I can't pull my alien child down, I can't comfort her". (123).

Eng is a child born out of relation between Jason, an American and a girl in Saigon. Jason's attraction towards that girl is the attraction of the West towards the East. Edward Said in *Orientalism*, argues that the Orient (East) has been represented as the binary opposite or Other of the Occident (West). Said argues: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony"(P5). Said discusses how the orientalist representations function to re impose postcolonial domination through suggesting that Western values, beliefs and forms of culture are imposed to counter the inherently negative traits of these so called inferior cultures. According to Said, this relation between Orient and Occident is: "the essential relationship, on political, cultural and even religious grounds, was seen in the west, which is what concerns us hereto be one between a strong and weak partner"(P40). East has always been a mystery for the West. The West has been fascinated by the mystic beauty of the East. Eng is a result of West's fascination for the East. Another postcolonial theorist, Gayatri Spivak, gave the notion that the center is also a margin, more like the center line on a road than the center of town. This configuring of the "center" also changes the position and status of the margins. In "Fathering", Jason helps Eng in curing her malady through coins rather than medical help of Dr. Kearns. He also says that

he and his Saigon kid are like a team. His statement about the togetherness of him, an American with Eng, a non- white and easterner, proves the claim of center becoming the margin.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the two stories have been analyzed with regard to the relationship between a father and his daughter. Mr. Bhowmick and Babli have same ethnic origin but they are the victims of alienation and assimilation. Mr. Bhowmick cannot assimilate the new culture while Babli has assimilated the American culture in true sense. Babli, though the legitimate child of Bhowmicks, is despised by her father. He did not support his daughter's stand and eventually attacks her. Bharati Mukherjee writes: " Their breaking point often presented as the denouement is sometimes violent, sometimes wierd. They are all individuals acutely conscious of their hyphenated identities engaged in a quest for self- discovery in an alien land. Caught as they are between two cultures, they are curious mixtures like Mr. Bhowmick. Their primary urge or rather necessity, to belong remains unfulfilled. They have left but not yet arrived and reminds an Indian reader, of the predicament of a character from Indian mythology, names Trishanku who like them was stuck in dead space"

On the contrary, Eng is not a legitimate child of Jason. They do not share ethnicity. Even then the father tries to protect his daughter from Sharon who again symbolizes American culture. At the end he decides to choose Eng and helps his daughter irrespective of their cultural disparities. On the whole both the stories are the stories of father and daughter relationship and of the differences between them in regard to culture and attitude. Both the stories have the East-West conflict in their background. America is the common country where action takes place. But the climax of both the stories is different and in a way opposite to each other.

REFERENCES

- Alam, Fakrul. *Bharati Mukherjee*. Twayne Publishers,1996.
 Mukherjee, Bharati. "Introduction", *Darkness* .(New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990).
 Mukherjee, Bharati. " A Father", *Darkness* .Canada: Penguin Books Canada Ltd., 1985.
 Mukherjee, Bharati. " Fathering", *The Middleman and Other Stories*. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India Pvt. Ltd., 1990.
 Pandya, Sudha. "*Bharati Mukherjee's Darkness : Exploring the Hyphenated Identity*". Quill (Dec. 1990), pp.68.
 ibid. p.73.
 Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.
 Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Nelson and Grossberg, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
 Tandon, Sushma. *Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective*. Sarup & Sons.