

Social Struggle of the Protagonists of Bharathi Mukherjee in her stories, “The Middleman and Other Stories”

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Abstract

In the modern short stories, social problems play an important role in the lives of the protagonists as the stories are character dominant. In the character dominant stories, the conflict is usually seen between the individual and society. The protagonist’s existence in the society depends upon his status in the society whether it is in India or abroad. Sometimes the protagonists are prone to struggle hard to prove themselves to fit into the society. The protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee struggle to establish their identity and fit well into America and American society. Married to a Canadian writer Clark Blaise, almost all of her short stories depict her dilemma between the two cultures, the East and West. This conflict forms the main theme of most of her short stories. After

completing her studies in America she went to Canada along with her husband where she had faced acute racial prejudice. It is explicit in her second volume of short stories "The Middleman and Other Stories".

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, Social Problems, Protagonist's struggle for existence, America and Canada.

Introduction

The volume of short stories, The Middleman and other stories, received much attention by the critics. The racial intolerance she experienced in Canada compelled her to move back to the United States. This second volume depicts the stories of America. She wrote them as a true citizen of America. In an interview with Sybil Steinberg of Publishers Weekly she describes her feelings about America:

Mine is a clear-eyed but definite love of America. I'm aware of the brutalities, the violence here, but in the long run my characters are survivors..... I feel there are people born to be Americans. By American I mean an intensity of spirit and a quality of desire. I feel American in a very fundamental way, whether Americans see me that way or not.¹

In most of the stories Mukherjee uses the American narrative modes in order to transport the Asian immigrants and make them transformative. In her stories she brings deep understanding of and sympathy for the plight of her characters, who find themselves caught between their new countries and the ones they have left

behind They have all brought with them false ideas about what to expect from Canada and America. Though the characters in all her stories are aware of the brutalities and violence that surround them and are often victimized by various forms of social oppression, she generally draws them as superiors. As Gabriel Sharmani says,

Mukherjee's characters share the experience of Diaspora as they explore new ways of belonging and 'becoming' in America, they are America's new 'middlemen' who have to negotiate between two modes of knowledge and remake home out of the hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between two worlds. 2

The protagonists of The Middleman and Other stories are trapped and struggled in American society. The Protagonists struggle to mix up and assimilate with the American culture. In doing so some are even humiliated. In the opening story "The Middleman" she describes the underworld activities in America. The narrator Alfie Judah is a middleman in the world of smugglers. Clovis.T.Ransome is a notorious gangster- adventurer under whom the drug what not. He is a sceptical person a hustler just like many immigrants. The narrator and other immigrants fail to find suitable jobs and become middlemen, because their background and past history of the countries from which they have come do not allow them to modify their ways except in rare occasions, as Judah says,

*I've seen worse. I've seen Baghdad, Bombay, Queens
- and now this moldering spread deep in Mayan*

country. Aztecs, Toltec's, mestizos, even some bashful whites with German accents. All that, and a lot of Texans. I'll learn the ropes. Forget the extradition order; I'm not a sinful man. I've listened to bad advice. I've placed my faith in dubious associates. My first American wife said, in the dog-eat-dog, Alfred, you're a beagle. My name is Alfie Judah, of the once-illustrious Smyrna, Aleppo, Baghdad - and now Flushing. Queens- Judahs. 3

Though, the story starts with the details of the narrator, the remaining of the story deals with beautiful Maria, wife of Ransom T Cloves the adventurer, who has captured her from the Minister, Mr. Gutierrez. Mukherjee, who keenly observes the American society, describes in detail the activities of the underworld smuggling in America in this story.

Mukherjee describes how the Asian men and women enthusiastically embrace the new world which, among other things, represents security, the possibility of self-realization and liberation from the restraints of the traditional societies in which they were remained in her other stories. As Thomas J. Carabas comments,

At the same time these immigrants are usually too sophisticated to uncritically embrace every aspect of American life. Mukherjee's protagonists are mostly well-educated women, who come to America with a cosmopolitan background and a firsthand knowledge of the upheavals and suffering which afflict most of the earth's inhabitants. This awareness prevents them from being readily absorbed into the mainstream of American life.

While a part of them enthusiastically adopt the best their new world has to offer, another sits warily on the sidelines as an independent spectator. ⁴

This is true in the case of the protagonists in the stories, "A Wife's story," "Jasmine", "Tenant", "Fighting for the Rebound", "Buried Lives", and "Danny's Girls" In "A Wife's Story" Mukherjee presents the interaction of Asian culture with the American culture and the liberation the American culture provides to the protagonists. Mrs. Panna Bhatt adapts very well to the social and cultural milieu of America. She feels free. 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." ⁵

In a delightful way she presents the difference between her grandmother and her improved status in U.S.As she says, "My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she'd registered for French lessons at the Alliance Francaise. My grandmother, the eldest daughter of a rich zamindar, was illiterate". ⁶ Being literate and well educated, her position sounds far better than those of her mother and grandmother. That part of a woman acting like a traditional wife is lost to her now, as she admits, "That part of my life is over, the way trucks have replaced Lorries in my vocabulary, the way Charity Chin and her lurid love life have replaced inherited notions of marital duty."⁷

While enjoying the free life of America on the one hand she also feels quite dreary, lonely, and confused on the

other expresses her anger against the tyrannical ways of America, as she says,

*I don't hate Mamet. It's the tyranny of the American dream that scares me. First, you don't exist. Then you're invisible. Then you're funny. Then you're disgusting. Insult, my American friends will tell me, is a kind of acceptance. No instant dignity here. A play like this, back home, would cause riots. Communal, racial and antisocial. The actors wouldn't make it off stage. This play, and all these awful feelings, would be safely locked up.*⁸

She is weighed down by the burden of two cultures and struggles hard to balance her past life and new life in America. Being Americanized totally, she still, sometimes breaks out of it and feels just like a true Indian woman. She surprises herself when she hugs Imre on the street. She also realizes how many changes she has to make when she gets ready to dress in a beautiful sari and her heavy ornate wedding jewellery to meet her husband at J.K.F. Airport. Though she gets ready just like an Indian traditional woman, she is not what she is outside. The story ends with a note that the foreign culture is not a hindrance but helps the protagonist to realize herself, though it is a bad indictment to the institution of marriage. She wants to come out of that bondage of the institution of marriage.

The Americans, Mukherjee's protagonist encounter with, are primarily middleclass white people, who fit the old white Anglo-Saxon idea of Americanness as Carabas says,

Many though not all, of these people are socially and economically established and their privileged status has hitherto isolated them not only from the changes in the world beyond their borders, but within America as well. These disturbing and often incomprehensible strangers bring to their insular lives unwanted knowledge to which they react in a manner as instinctive and predictable as to be labelled a tropism.⁹

The racial tropism manifests itself when the Asian newcomer's presence becomes unbearable, and provokes the American to leave the scene. It is presented in the story, "Fighting for Rebound", Griff, the narrator relates his affair with one of the immigrants Miss Blanquita from Manila. Like many of the protagonists, she has a background of wealth and culture. She knows six languages, knows the American culture very well and daring enough to ridicule their ways. To Griff she is sometimes so familiar and sometimes so different. Blanquita feels comfortable with Griff and with the American ways because nowadays America is every one's dream and everyone's second country. Moreover, Blanquita understands well what the problem is as she explains, "You are all emotional cripples. All you Americans, you just worry about your own measly little relationships. You don't care how much you hurt the world."¹⁰

The protagonist in the story, "Tenant" feels rootlessness in America. She is a psychic because she suffers from self-alienation, she will not be able to find roots either in her

native culture or foreign. Maya Sanyal teaches English in the Department of English at University of Northern Iowa. Most of the immigrants like Maya Sanyal have lived in merely independent or emerging countries which are prone by civil and religious conflicts. All the immigrants who have come to America by chance or by necessity should understand the two hundred years of history of America and learn to adapt to American society. We find Maya Sanyal emerging herself into a different woman at different stages in the subtle, complex and traumatic process of being a new woman. Her American colleague, Fran, is responsible for bringing her to Iowa. Even while talking with Fran, and drinking a glass of bourgorn, which is the symbol of her, new life, she feels lonely and contemplates on her position in America.

Fran considers Maya as a bold adventurer, who has made a clear break with her past in India, but as we come to the end of the story, we know that there is no set back in the mind of Maya. When Rab Chatterjee, another Bengali professor, invites her to his home, she dresses carefully in one of her best and loveliest saris. At his house and while returning to her house she has been humiliated by Chatterjee because he knows about her marriage with an American and the divorce later. In the entire Bengali community in America, she has been considered a 'loose woman' and a divorcee and unfits to marry a respectable Indian in their community. She also is not satisfied with the American society, though she has become an American citizen. At the end, we come to know that

though she owns an American citizenship she will never be able to understand the vigour, the light, and the hustle of the new world. Her psychological makeup does not allow her to get a permanent home in the new world; she is a tenant and remains a tenant forever. The social problem of Maya and protagonists like her will never be solved.

In the story "The Management of Grief", Mukherjee describes the agony and pain of the Indians in Canada, when they lose their husbands, wives, children, and relatives in a plane crash. It is a story that emerged out of her scintillating and controversial documentary, 'The Sorrow and the Terror'. In the actual crash of Air India flight 182 on 23rd June 1995, which killed 329 passengers, most of the victims were Canadians of Indian origin. Shaila, the protagonist narrator of the story, loses her husband and two sons. Her neighbour Mrs.Kusum loses her daughter, her husband and another Dr.Raghav loses his four children and wife and the total family of his relatives. While all the Indians in that locality are brooding over the death of their kith and kin the Canadian Government sends a volunteer interpreter to settle the matter concerning the payment of dues to the government and the payment of compensation for the deceased families. The language is a problem for them. Some of the Indians do not know English. The Government representative pays the first visit to Shaila because all the Indians in the locality put forth her as a bold woman who can manage the situation grimly. So she approaches Shaila and requests

her to help her in settling the Documents of the deceased people. Mukherjee even in her grief presents a situation of communal harmony among all Indians, when they gather at the hospital to find the photographs of the dead bodies that are brought to the hospital.

Judith Templeton a social worker who comes to settle the payment of compensation visits Shaila, seeking her help in speaking with the other families. Among them are the Sikh couple who have lost their two sons. They do not want to sign the necessary papers because to sign the papers was equal to sign their son's death warrant. They were illiterate people. They did not know even how to fill up the cheques to pay the necessary bills. So the water, current, and gas connections to their house are stopped. Even then, they do not want to sign the papers. On the other hand, they are so stubborn that their sons will certainly come to save them if they lead a hopeless life. They have strong faith in their sons and on their brought up. Shaila tries to make them understand the situation, telling them that she too has lost her husband and her two sons. But the Sikhs are stubborn. Judith and Shaila feel helpless. While they are in the car Judith talks about her next destitute a woman who always cried. She calls her the 'realness'. Then Shaila gets angry against the inhuman feelings of Judith and requests her to stop the car. She gets down and slams the door leaving Judith to ask the question "Is there anything I said? Anything I did Shaila. Let us talk about it." ¹¹

This story is a good example for her ability to present her socio-political awareness. While explaining the deeply moving response to the Air India crash she also criticizes Canada's racialized society and its inadequate attempts at handling the situation.

Conclusion

Thus the social problems play an important role in the lives of the protagonists as the stories are character dominant. The protagonists of Mukherjee struggle to establish their identity and fit well in the American society. Almost all the stories in *The Middleman and Other Stories*, depict her dilemma between the two cultures of East and West, the adopted and the inherited cultures. All the immigrants who have come to America by necessity have to understand the two hundred years of history of America and learn to adapt to American society. The final story "The Management of Grief" is a pungent hit at the irresponsible behaviour of the Canadian government who does not show any concern when many Asians die in a plane crash. Instead of extending their help to survivors of the families of the deceased, the Canadian government demands the settlement of the dies from them. Mukherjee criticises the inhuman behaviour of the Canadian government towards the Asian immigrants.

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