

NEO – NATIONALISM IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Dr. Rajesh Kumar

Ph.D (English) J.P. University, Chapra, Bihar

Bharti Mukherjee's discourse of nationalism is articulated and judged from two sites; in her fiction, three novels and two collection of stories which deal with American culture of immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds seemingly Indian. She is also well versed in constructing a personal mythology of immigration and 'assimilation' in numerous autobiographical and quasi autobiographical writings that include non-fiction, interviews, essays and articles.

In her non-fictional writing, she supports the notion of 'assimilation' – a concept that generally carries negative connotations in Australian context, especially in terms of aboriginal history and the notorious assimilation policies of 1940 onwards-and contrasts the American policy with what she sees as the less successful Canadian 'mosaic' policy of multiculturalism (Healey 1988; Blaise and Mukherjee 1987, quoted in Goodwin 1989 :412).

Mukherjee's endorsement of American nationalism is similar to the canonization of her fiction; in 1988 her second collection of stories *The middleman and other stories* was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award (Which one reviewer tells us, is given by the

organization of 485 professional book editors and critics from across the country and carries more clout in literary circles than the National Book Awards [sponsored by the publishing industry] or ‘The Pulitzer Prize’ [Patel 1989:72]) . Since then she has had front page reviews in the New York Times Book Review and has been invited to prestigious literary festivals in Canada, Newzealand and Australia.

A Trajectory located in Geography has become a landmark in Mukherjee’s fiction and her attitude towards immigration and nationalism. The two novels *The Tiger’s Daughter*(1972) and *Wife* (1975) and the four Canadian stories of her first short stories collection *Darkness*(1985) is separated from the later work by a space of ten years (1975-85) during which time she emigrated from Canada to the United States(1981). The early work with the exception of (*The Tiger’s Daughter*) is set in Canada and generally airs a pessimism , anger and sense of homelessness ; in a story from this period (one quite stylistically distinct from the ‘later’ work) published in *Darkness* , ‘The world according to Hsu’ Ratna Clayton, a woman married to a Canadian academic and bitter about Canadian racism, holidaying amongst a hotch- potch of tourists on an island off the coast of Africa, muses that ‘[n]o matter where she lived , she would never feel so at home again’ (1986:56)

‘*Wife*’ the most acclaimed novel by Mukherjee deals with alienation, depression and suffocation of the central character. The novel also

depicts a bleak vision of an immigrant woman's failure to assimilate into Western Culture. The novel is set in New York city, Mukherjee has commented that it in fact reflects her life in Toronto (1981:39; Goodwin 1989:411) Both *Wife and Jasmine* reflects neo-nationalism. Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife*, is timid and passive whereas *Jasmine* is courageous and active. Dimple does not make *Jasmine's* successful transition into American culture as the following episode demonstrates:

Ina doodled on the margin of a leaflet until there was a woman with her sari wrapped around her like a shroud in one side and another woman in a bikini with a pert bosom on the other. " That is me", she said, with a shallow laugh Before and after. The great moral and physical change , and all that" . "I am always a Before", Dimple said " I guess I have never been an After".

The heady exuberance of *Jasmine* and Mukherjee's reading of the novel's celebratory nationalism contrast markedly with the disillusionment of the earlier Canadian novel and bitterness of her outspoken article on racism, ' *An Invisible Woman*'. Bharati Mukherjee says, "Our girls can take their places with the best anywhere in the world ", Mother John-Bapitist, the headmistress, had promised my father on my first day of school. On a sticky August night in 1961, when my younger sister and I , on my way to the University of Iowa, left by Air India for New York, I felt that I could. Great privilege had been conferred upon me . (1981:36)

This trajectory- from Canada to the United States, from pessimism to optimism, from racism and homelessness to a celebration of assimilationist nationalism takes on further significance in terms of Mukherjee's career path from relative literary anonymity and lack of recognition in Canada (Mukherjee 1981:39) to award winning success and cannonisation in the States; Patel reports that “ it is with “The Middleman, that this ----woman has found her true literary identity- something that she claims coincided with her discovery of herself as an American’ (1989:72-3)

Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* has a tinge and touch of biculturalism which is perceptible in post Colonial India . Mukherjee explains and explores the postcolonial dilemma of an English – educated elite expatriate on a visit to India. The central character Tara feels alienated from her friends and their way of life which are depicted from an outsider's viewpoint. The narrator mourns the decline of Calcutta in the face of communist –inspired populist uprising. There is no one to understand the feelings of Tara . The World – weariness and angst of this novel culminates in the violent metaphor of rape. Tara is raped by a brutal and evil politician. The novel ends with the repentance of Tara.

Mukherjee rejects the nostalgia of this early book in favour of the theme of the successful ‘conquest’ of the New world; the immigrant of the Middleman She describes as a new pioneer’ (1989:73) and the eponymous character of Jasmine,’ a conqueror, a minor hero’ (Healey

1988). In rejecting the experience of expatriation figured in the tiger's Daughter She takes on the myth of the immigrant in its place. Expatriation, she argues, is 'the great temptation Of the ex-colonial writer (like Naipal) and she supports instead its 'opposite' immigration (1988 :28) Once again she figures this transformation in geographic terms; in Canada she was a 'psychological expatriate' (1988:28), in the United States an immigrant and a citizen. Not undergoing this conversion from expatriation to immigration is, in Mukherjee's eyes, evidence of nostalgia and refusal to participate in the New world and embrace its citizenship and nationalism. To refuse to do this is to fail as a writer, in Mukherjee's terms: 'lacking a country, avoiding all the messiness of rebirth as an immigrant, eventually harms even the finest sensibility, (1988:29)

Bharti Mukherjee also describes old world in her narrative in which the old world of India is repressive and caste, gender or family are given priority. The New world is presented as a place where anyone can be a success, including immigrants. The immigrants Mukherjee writes about 'make their futures in ways they could not have done in the old world' (Hancock 1987:303) The New world is the world of the individual and all you need to make it is 'gumpton' (vignission 1992), Mukherjee puts stress on the battler quality of her characters and romanticizes the struggle of the individual:

These immigrants are grabby and greedy – and I am using these words in healthy ways. Larger than life. Eager. In order to be American you have to be hustle. (1990 C :220)

Mukherjee's romance of immigration and vision of a New World of democracy, freedom and unlimited possibility is figured vividly at the end of *Jasmine*. When Bud's adopted Vietnamese son, Du, leaves his American 'family' to be reunited with his immigrant sister. The event has been described as an oedipal struggle as Jasmine, the narrator, acknowledges the immigrant's destiny to 'inherit' America.

The discourse of the migrant as metropolitan and fantasy of the land of opportunity could be described, borrowing Spivak's phrase, as a phantasmatic hegemonic nativist counter narrative (1989:281-2). Spivak also suggests that the counter narrative of the diasporic elite matters much. Mukherjee identifies the U.K. and Canada with imperialism and describes her choice to emigrate to the US as a choice for freedom from imperialism.

Her mythologizing of herself as a writer is aimed at constructing herself as an American and at rereading her own experience as national or, more precisely, neo – national. Mukherjee's neo-nationalism, figured in the fantasy of land of opportunity and the romance of the immigrant, is, therefore, the counter narrative to her own diasporic condition.

The novelist talks about ‘real’ (new) America and reinvents a semiotics of American citizenship and ethnicity. While Timothy Brennan, for example praises Mukherjee for her cosmopolitanism and her ‘defiant challenge to traditional ways of conceiving the ‘national’ (1989:34).

On the whole, her representation of the immigrant articulates the desire to be metropolitan, to be American. To her diasporic postcolonial elite is much more important than the immigrant underclass who enters the New world without the privileges of the elite. Hence, the immigrant underclass is considered to be cheap and exploited labour and has a different relationship despite the fact he or she lives in the same country.

Work cited

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