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CHALLENGES OF EARLY IMMIGRANTS AS DEPICTED IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S THE
MIDDLE MAN AND OTHER STORIES

A BABU RAJENDRA PRASAD

Assistant Professors of English
Ideal Institute of Technology, Ghaziabad (U.P.)



A BABU RAJENDRA
PRASAD

ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee started writing in the late 1970s and still proves her mettle through her novels and short stories. The middle man and other stories by Bharati Mukherjee focuses on the challenges of early immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee herself got involved so much that she went to the extent of developing one story "Jasmine" into a full - fledged novel. The collection of short stories helps the readers to gather valuable inputs about the struggle for survival and the ultimate triumph of early immigrants.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Diasporic literature got a shot in the arm with the arrival of Bharati Mukherje in the 70s. Bharati Mukherjee is at her best in both her novels and short stories. The collection of short stories "The middle man and other stories" got the National Book Critics award for Bharati Mukherjee. The middle man and other stories is taken for analysis by the author as it depicts the immense hardships faced by immigrants in their quest for identity and survival.

One of the stories in the collection "Fighting for the rebound" is slightly complex and as a result puzzling for the readers. Bharati Mukherjee uses I person narrative in this story to make it appealing to the readers.

All is not well between the two characters, Blanquita and the narrator, whose name is revealed as Griffin slightly later in the story. Blanquita is slightly inclined towards the pet cat Marcos that helps her in overcoming depression to a certain extent.

Once an immigrant makes a comparative study between one's place of birth and place of settlement, the former always looks pleasant. This situation is experienced by Blanquita in the story.

Blanquita says,

"I should never have left Manila." She further adds:-

"The east is east and the west is west and never the twain shall meet."(Fighting for the rebound, pg 80)

The longing for one's own country is one of the staple themes of Diaspora literature. Fighting for the rebound by Bharati Mukherjee also follows the same trend.

Materialistic advancement makes an immigrant tilt towards the adopted country but practical considerations force him to continue his links with his own country.

The writer brings out the dual character of the immigrant in her own inimitable style. Bharati Mukherjee writes as follows:

“For all the rotten things she says about the Philippines, or the mistines she reserves for the Stars and Stripes, she’s kept her old citizenship.” (FFTR, page 81).

First person narrative is continuously used in the story. The narrator is involved in the action. The narrator’s name is mentioned as Griffin after almost three pages.

Having tested the patience of readers for a pretty long time, the writer unravels the plot for the understanding of readers. As the readers are left scratching their heads about the relationship between Blanquita and Griffin, Bharati Mukherjee makes it clear that both of them are colleagues working together in office.

Blanquita expresses her inner thoughts forcefully without any remorse to Griffin. May be Blanquita is supremely confident about her abilities and that is the reason why she has no qualms in speaking her mind.

Blanquita tells Griffin angrily,

“You’re 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.”

(FFTR, page 85).

In spite of some misunderstanding, the narrator seems to have benefited due to the strong personality of Blanquita. The narrator also acknowledges the contribution of Blanquita in his life. He remarks:

Without Blanquita I’d be “just another Joe Blow Blockhead yuppie in his Reeboks. It’s she who brings me to bed each night and wakes me up each morning...” (FFTR, page 86)

As the story inches towards conclusion, another character named Maura is introduced by the writer. Maura is given a good certificate by Blanquita and she also tries hard to woo Griffin, the narrator.

Blanquita’s trust on Griffin prevents him from falling down in life. The last line of the story goes as follows:-

“I don’t want to start anything complicated.”(FFTR, page 94)

By saying a firm no to the repeated advances made by Maura, the narrator brings a semblance of order to his life. The story ends on a positive note, as the narrator successfully puts a full stop to his desires that were gradually assuming dangerous proportions.

JASMINE (127-138)

Unlike the characters of Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee’s characters are slightly complex. They are mostly illegal immigrants. Jasmine is one such illegal immigrant.

In the story, Jasmine, Mukherjee immediately sets the ball in motion. Bharati Mukherjee straightaway gets into the thick of action.

Biographical elements are clearly visible in the beginning of the story. Just like Bharati Mukherjee, the protagonist also comes to the USA from Canada.

Illegal immigrants face problem at every stage in their lives. The protagonist in the story ‘Jasmine’ suffers throughout. Ever since her entry into the USA, till the very end she faces hardships. An immigrant has to be at one’s wit end all the time to dodge the officials at the border. The arduous journey of Jasmine from Canada to the USA is vividly explained by Bharati Mukherjee in the first two pages.

Survival is one of the main reasons, why an individual has to make an illegal entry into a developed country like the USA. The second reason for making an illegal entry into a financially better country is ambition. Bharati Mukherjee elaborates on this idea, when she writes:-

“Trinidad was too tiny. That was trouble. Trinidad was an island stuck in the middle of nowhere. What kind of place was that for a girl with ambition? (Jasmine,128)

Illegal migrants are at the mercy of agents, who promise to do everything for them. This is the main reason, why Jasmine comes in contact with The Daboos after landing in the USA. In her inimitable style, the novelist writes:-

“Her daddy had told her to talk to the Daboos first chance. The Daboos ran a service fixing up illegals with islanders who had made it in legally.”(Jasmine, 128)

Another point to be noted is that the writer spends nearly one and a half pages to describe the travails of an illegal immigrant before uttering a single word about the second character, Mrs Daboo. This narrative technique occurs repeatedly in the short stories of Bharati Mukherjee.

There is an old saying in English, which goes as follows:-

“Necessity is the mother of invention.”

It is sheer necessity that makes an individual to think of innovative methods for solving any vexing problem. Illegal immigrants follow novel methods to overcome their problems.

As pointed earlier, survival itself is a crucial issue for illegal immigrants. So, the protagonist has no hesitation in doing some odd jobs in order to sustain herself in the dog eat dog world.

The irony to be noted here is that the illegal immigrant feels contented even after getting the bare minimum. The complex situation becomes clear for the readers, once they go through the following lines. The following lines throw interesting insights about the lives of illegal immigrants.

“The Daboos asked her to keep books for them and to clean the rooms in the new wing, and she could stay in 16B as long as she liked....They said she could cook her own roti; Mr Daboo would bring in a stove, two gas rings that you could fold up in a metal box....It wasn't a bad deal, better than stories she'd heard about Trinidad girls in the states.”(Jasmine, pg 129)

Though the undocumented immigrants face a lot of problems, they are happy with whatever they get due to lack of any option. Another interesting aspect of an undocumented immigrants' life to be noted is that the agents and the well off people fully exploit the extreme poverty of day-crossers to their advantage.

Lack of papers in the hands of illegal immigrants makes them to work beyond the permitted time limits. A quick glance into the life of Jasmine reveals how much she struggles to make both ends meet. The novelist explains the travails of the protagonist as follows:-

“All day every day except Sundays Jasmine worked. There wasn't just the bookkeeping and the cleaning up. Mr. Daboo had her working on the match-up marriage service.”(Jasmine, 129)

No specific role is given to Jasmine by her employer. Jasmine is made to do many odd jobs by her employer, as the situation for Jasmine is extremely fluid.

Racism is not explicitly mentioned by the writer in her short story 'Jasmine' but one can infer the harmful effects of racism through the works of Bharati Mukherjee. The protagonist asks:-

“So what if the boss was black? This was a new life, and she wanted to learn everything.”(Jasmine, 129)

The Blacks are not held in high esteem by the whites for many centuries. This view percolates from top to bottom. In other words, the younger generation learns certain things, both good and bad from the older generation. In the story, Jasmine, the two kids Viola and Loretta seem to have racial prejudice, which they might have acquired from their parents. In one line, the author says:-

“Viola and Loretta, for all their fancy American ways, wouldn't go out with blacks.”(Jasmine, 129)

Having devoted a substantial part of the narrative to the travails of immigrants, Bharati Mukherjee shifts her focus to the other happenings in an immigrants' life. Not only the employer but also the people who are in no way connected with the protagonist try to exploit her sexually. One should read the lines minutely to understand the evil intention of those, who try to harass the protagonist.

Ever since Jasmine comes in contact with the boyfriends of Loretta and Viola respectively, life becomes unbearable for her. Both the young men try to make advances towards her. The line written by the author and uttered by Loretta's boyfriend has sexual connotations. The first line uttered by Loretta's boyfriend to Jasmine is as follows:-

“You have eyes I could leap into girl.”(pg. 130, Jasmine)

The undocumented immigrants have no other option but to change jobs to make both ends meet. The protagonist in the story 'Jasmine' also changes her master after a short span of time. The Daboos took care of Jasmine and they were followed by the Moffits. When one serves two masters, it is natural that one master appears better than the other.

In the case of Jasmine, the second master appears better than the first one. The Moffits not only gave three times the amount paid by the Daboos but also did not interfere in the personal activities of the protagonist.

The writer talks about the benevolence of the Daboos through the protagonist. Jasmine comments on the generosity of the Moffits as follows:-

“In this country Jesus givin out good luck only!”(page 134, Jasmine)

The main reason for Jasmine’s appreciation of Moffits is that the family is not keen to victimize her even after knowing the truth. The novelist writes:-

“By this time they knew she wasn’t a student, but they didn’t care and said they wouldn’t report her. They never asked if she was illegal on top of it.”(page 134, Jasmine)

Though everything appears hunky-dory for quite some time, the employer reveals his true colour at the end. The employer succeeds in seducing Jasmine much against her wishes at the fag end of the story. The storyteller has successfully brought out the travails of immigrants who land on foreign shores without any paper or document.

FATHERING

The pains of the father in bringing up the child are well explained by the author in the short story ‘Fathering.’ If the travails of an undocumented immigrant is the central theme of the short story ‘Jasmine,’ the travails of a father is the main theme of the short story ‘Fathering.’ Bharati Mukherjee proves her versatility through her different short stories.

The indifferent attitude of the mother towards the child comes as a cultural shock for the readers. How life changes completely after marriage is beautifully explained by Bharati Mukherjee in the story. By elaborating on the reasons for the failure of narrator’s marriage, Bharati Mukherjee arouses the interest of readers. Bharati Mukherjee writes nonchalantly as follows:-

“Ten years later the screw-ups with the marriage, the job, women, the works. Until Eng popped up in my life, I really believed it didn’t happen.”(Fathering, 118)

As always the case, Bharati Mukherjee focuses on a complex network of relationships in this short story “Fathering.” also. The wife’s not so happy relationship with the husband is well recorded by Bharati Mukherjee very early in the story. The sudden change in Sharon’s attitude towards the narrator is not mysterious not only for the narrator but also the readers. In her own lucid style, the author writes:-

“Once upon a time Sharon used to be a cheerful accommodating woman. It isn’t as if Eng was dumped on us out of the blue. She knew I was tracking my kid. Coming to terms with the past was Sharon’s idea.”(pg 118. Jasmine)

The mention of the word ‘past’ heightens the mystery in the minds of the readers. Bharati Mukherjee employs first person narrative in the story to make the readers understand the pain of the narrator.

A few things become clear for the readers very early in the story. The child Eng is not the biological child of the couple and she has come into the couple’s life to drive away the emptiness in their lives. The child, instead of driving away the emptiness has widened the rift between the narrator and Sharon.

It is very obvious to the readers that there is absolutely no love between Sharon and Eng in the very beginning of the story itself. Without any remorse in her heart, the mother gives instructions to Eng as follows:-

“Come get in bed with us, baby. Let Dad feel your forehead. You burning up with fever?”

It is no surprise that the child replies with the same venom to express her displeasure. The child is in no mood to even talk to Sharon. The child gives vent to her feelings as follows:-

“Dad, let’s go down to the kitchen. Just you and me.”

After a brief period of time, the child goes one step further and emphatically says:-

“Not her, Dad. We don’t want her with us in the kitchen.”

The situation gets so messy that Sharon decides to leave the house at the first opportunity. The conversation that takes place between Sharon and the narrator clearly reveals that all is not well in the marital life.

When Sharon is asked the reasons for abruptly leaving the house, she replies:-

“I’m going to the mall to buy some aspirin.” (Fathering, p 120)

Not only the narrator but also the readers understand that there is no iota of truth in the words of Sharon. The problem in post modern society is that people find it hard to work out a compromise formula.

Negotiation skills are absolutely zilch in the characters of *Fathering*. Lack of negotiation skills is clearly visible in this story. Every character tries to pull each other in the opposite direction. Post modern age is an age of extreme individualism. Bharati Mukherjee has beautifully brought this out in this short story.

The readers clearly notice that the protagonist's wife Sharon finds it difficult to accept Eng and that is why, she makes up her mind to run away from the house giving some lame excuse.

Sharon has come to the medical practitioner's house for getting treatment for some mysterious illness. This is a clear indication that she has cheated on her husband. Sharon's actions leave the narrator completely exasperated. Bharati Mukherjee throws light on the narrator's mood as follows:-

"I don't think she exactly recognizes me, although later she'll later say she did. All that stuff about Kearns going hunting must have been a lie. Even the stuff about having to buy aspirins in the mall. She was planning all along to get here." (*Fathering*, page 123)

An immigrant's life appears pretty from outside but a careful analysis clearly reveals that his life is not a bed of roses. When one selects a life partner outside one's native country, the union brings with it its own set of complications. Cross-cultural marriages make it hard for both the parties. This is precisely the reason, why both Sharon and the narrator are not able to see eye to eye on many issues.

Taking the help of a psychiatrist to make things work out is quite common in the west. On the other hand, marriage is considered sacrosanct in a country like India. In the short story, '*Fathering*' a doctor voluntarily takes the role of a mediator to bring a kind of rapprochement between the narrator and his partner Sharon. The doctor says,

"It's none of my business, Jason but you and Sharon might try an honest-to-goodness heart-to-heart."(*Fathering*, 123)

The words of the mediator seem to make no difference to Sharon's thinking. The readers are not able to understand the reason for Sharon's hatred towards Eng. Deliberately, Bharati Mukherjee withholds the reason for Sharon's continued hatred for Eng to intensify the curiosity of readers. According to Sharon, Eng is the main reason for the rift between her and the narrator, but what keeps the plot riveting is the mystery surrounding the child, Eng. Sharon candidly admits:-

"Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back, Jase. If you love me, send her back." (Page 123)

The traumatic childhood may be one of the main reasons for Eng showing a lot of fury towards the doctor and Sharon. Some catastrophe would have occurred in Eng's life. This is the main reason why the small girl screams at the doctor as follows:-

"Get the hell out, you bastard."

"Old way is good way.... When they shoot my grandma, you think pills do her any good? You Yankees, please go home."(Page 124)

Bharati Mukherjee proves her mettle in the story "*Fathering*" effortlessly. Bharati Mukherjee is able to bring out the internal trauma experienced by all the characters in the short story.

The child's trauma is due to her horrible past. Only at the fag end of the story, the horrible past is known to the readers. The loose ends are tied by the writer at the very end. The mother's trauma is due to the fact that the child has no iota of love in its heart for the mother.

The father's intense suffering is because he is caught between his love for the wife and the child. The writer skillfully juxtaposes the repeated pleas made by both the mother and the child to highlight the grief of the father.

The mother Sharon says:-

"Everything was fine until she got here. Send her back, Jase. If you love me, send her back."(Page 123)

In the very next line, the child Eng says:-

"She's bad, Dad. Send her back."(Page 123)

Without explicitly using words to bring out the torture of the father Jason, the writer remarks:-

"Guilt, not love, is what I feel."(Page 123)

The narrative techniques followed by Bharati Mukherjee are worth mentioning. The above line is a clear indication that the master storyteller Bharati Mukherjee is second to none, when it comes to employing narrative techniques to make the story enjoyable for the readers.

Without overdoing anything, Bharati Mukherjee in just one masterstroke convinces the readers that the protagonist also experiences upheaval in his mind. The word 'guilt' is a clear indication that all is not well in the life of the protagonist.

II. Conclusion

The paper focuses on the challenges of immigrants with special reference to three stories namely Fighting for the rebound, Jasmine and Fathering. Anyone who comes to a foreign country without completing the paperwork and other formalities faces a lot of problems. The stories taken for analysis highlight the difficulties faced by immigrants in alien shores as they come to grips with the natives, and their culture. The stories are extremely poignant and they leave a lump in the throat of readers. Bharati Mukherjee has successfully brought out the pain and sufferings of early immigrants through the stories in her inimitable style.

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