



A STUDY OF SHORT FICTIONS OF TWO DIASPORA WRITERS, JHUMPA LAHIRI AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE.

JOYITA SHAW

Ph.D. Scholar

Department of English
Banaras Hindu University,
Varanasi, (UP) INDIA.

ABSTRACT

Nowadays with one foot in America and a toe in homeland south Asians immigrants instead of moaning for their long gone past celebrates their newfound free-floating existence. Although memories sometimes make their heart bleed but instead of haunted by the past, immigrants of today are desperate to forge their new identities beyond the chaos of confused world of immigrants

Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri are two well-known diaspora writers with their bags full of awards for their contribution to diaspora writings. Jhumpa Lahiri is an American writer from Indian Origin; hence, her India is seen through her borrowed memories from her parents, relatives, friends and, her short trips to India in her childhood days. But in comparison to Lahiri's world, Bharati Mukherjee's India is not frozen in time full of goodness, rather with riots and gender biased ambience it sometimes stinks too. Jhumpa's characters long for the sweet past which appears to be more real to them than the actual reality as we have in Mrs Sen from "Mrs Sen's" who pines for her known ambit with beckoning hands of known peoples. Mukherjee's characters in contrast to that are different with their overt desire to be part of the host culture, so we see Panna of "The Wife's Story" who prolongs her stay in America to enjoy her academic success as well as her female freedom. Again there is Jasmine the eponymous character of the story "Jasmine" who ends up feeling home at America confessing that her homeland Trinidad is too tiny for an ambitious girl like her. Thus being part of a heterogeneous culture the study of Diaspora is significant as the dilemma faced by expatriates are quite similar with any heterogeneous country like India.

Keywords- *Diaspora, acculturation, assimilation, immigrants, and alienation.*

Nowadays with one foot in America and a toe in homeland, South Asians immigrants instead of moaning for their long gone past, celebrating their new found free floating existence. Although memories sometimes make their heart bleed but instead of haunted by the past, immigrants of today are desperate to forge their new identities beyond the chaos of confused world of immigrants.

Ambition to be limitless is what that drives today's humanity away from their known territory to be with the unknown; no matter what comes in between human and his ambition, he is

JOYITA SHAW

1 | Page



ready to challenge because he wishes to free , to succeed to be liberated and to be one with the whole world. Rabindranath Tagore in his poem “Balaka/ The flight of Cranes” (1916) has expressed his desire to be free floating to be limitless. He wishes to be like those migrant birds who are always in motion as if they are calling the poet to break all narrow domestic boundaries and to chant the song of motion (Heta noi, ono kotha , ono kotha, ono konokhane.)” “Not here, Elsewhere, Elsewhere, Somewhere else.”

Since the law of immigration in America has become favorable for upper class and upper middle class educated masses, a fresh bloom of immigrant people in America can be visible; reason may be different for every individual to leave their own country but liberation is something very much in the mind of all immigrants. Liberation the very word connotes multiple meanings, which can be interpreted in the sense of economy, politics, and tradition and so on. Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee have distinct place among Indian Diasporic writers who celebrates all aspects of diasporic culture in their writings. Jhumpa Lahiri being second-generation Bengali American writer celebrates her identity as an American writer who says, “I wasn’t born here but I might as well have been.” On another hand, Bharati Mukherjee as a first naturalized citizen of America celebrates her assimilation with the greatest melting pot of all culture. In writings of both the writers, an urge to live in the present, to assimilate in the host culture can be visible as both the writers creations are marked with characters who wishes to belong to their chosen home rather than going back to their roots. However sometimes their roots make them nostalgic, sometimes they are pricked by past memories but no one tries to retreat, reflecting their desire to shake off dusty memories to carry their journey forward. They can lament for losing ties with their native culture but feels blessed to be in a world full of material success and comfort as they never actually wishes to go back to their roots. Sometimes immigrants do complain about present but that is because of the past illusion regarding promising life in America as we see in the case of Mrs. Sen in lahiri’s short story “Mrs. Sen” from “Interpreter of Maladies”. Mrs. Sen becomes disillusioned about American life which fails to give her the comfort which she wishes to have, she says “they think I live a life of a queen... they think I press a buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace.(p-139).Its Mrs. Sen’s illusion regarding American life which makes her angry and disappointed, in which America does nothing . Throughout the story, we see Mrs. Sen leading a life full of emptiness as her husband never bothers to give her any companionship and that is the real reason of being alienated ;she feels lonely and out of place. Mrs. Sen would have never felt alienated if her husband had given her proper attention and love. Mrs Sen’s husband and his passive attitude towards Mrs Sen actual make Mrs Sen longs for home as back home her situation would have been slightly different because of orientation of her society where women love chatting endlessly with neighbors filling their hours of mundane routine life with endless chitchat and gossips. Mrs. Sen’s husband, the product of Indian patriarchy treats her wife as non-entity, busy in his work he fails to provide Mrs. Sen any mental support which makes her feel lonely and alienated in America.



Jhumpa Lahiri's second collection of short stories very aptly highlights the present theme as we see most of the second-generation immigrants try to look forward in strengthening their bond with their present rather than giving opportunity to their root and culture in becoming obstacle in enjoying their present. The very first story "Unaccustomed Earth" shows the protagonist Ruma married with an American man. Ruma not only marries an American man but also gives her child an Americanized upbringing. Ruma wears neither traditional dress, nor she feels comfortable in speaking Bengali. "Bengali had never been a language in which she felt like an adult. Her Bengali was slipping from her. (p-12). She does not even cook traditional meals, which is very vital for keeping alive ones traditional past and culture intact. Even Ruma's father too behaves like American as he wishes to live alone instead of living with Ruma after his wife's death; in appearance, too he looks like old American. "He was wearing a baseball cap that said Pompeii, brown cotton pants and a sky-blue polo shirt, and a pair of white leather sneakers. She was struck by the degree to which her father resembled an American in his old age. (p-11). He even starts dating another woman, which is unthinkable in case of Indian set up. Added more to that Ruma even does not feel like taking burden of her father in his old age, which is very much expected, from an Indian daughter. " Ruma feared that her father would become a responsibility , an added demand , continuous present in a way she was no longer used to.(p-7).

In the next story, in "Hell-Heaven" the second-generation storyteller is very much comfortable as an American who had to fight with her mother to lead life like any normal American kid. Narrator's mother being first generation immigrant tries to preserve her Indian Identity by strictly maintaining her Indian Bengali heritage as she speaks Bengali and cooks only authentic Bengali meals. An obvious clash start shooting up in between her and the narrator when she refuses to let narrator attain late night parties or date someone saying, "don't think you'll get away with marrying an American..."(p-75) making Usha the narrator very upset on her as Usha says "I was thirteen, the thought of marriage irrelevant to my life. Still, her words upset me..."(p-75). The narrator's mother even shows reluctance to let her wear bra or to let her go out with her friends at night as she wishes to preserve her native tradition. Usha's mother coming from different background having all together different orientation refuses to change her moral standers or lifestyle according to her present situation. However, Usha being part of American culture become unable to understand her mother's moral makeup and so both had tough time in reconciling with each other. At times Usha even starts keeping secret about her life as her mother suffocates her with her Indian morality and stands in between her and her desire to lead life like a normal American girl free from the clutches of her native traditions. Her mother's negative attitude and aversion for western culture grows as she starts feeling infatuation for a fellow Bengali engineer who eventually ditches her for an American girl. In reality Usha's mother did not get deserving attention from her husband and in result she turns towards Pranab Chakroborty that is something could have happened in case of India too; so her hatred for America is baseless. Later as the story



proceeds, we see Usha's mother reconcile with her way of life as well as with America when Usha confesses about her breakups and heartbreaks to her mother leading similar confession from her mother who also confesses about her own infatuation and suicide attempt for Pranab. "My mother and I had also made peace; she had accepted the fact that I was not only her daughter but a child of America as well. Slowly, she accepted that I dated one American as well ... She welcomed my boyfriends into our home and when things didn't work out she told me I would find someone better. After years of being idle, she decides, when she turned fifty, to get a degree in library science at a nearby University. (p-82). The reason Usha's mom hated America was an American girl Deborah whom she envy but at the end, she reconciles with her as Pranab also ditches her for another Bengali woman. Their common pain makes her realize deceptive nature of men and she starts accepting America without any malice.

Next story "A Choice Accommodations" also deals with an Indian man, educated in America who decides to get married and have kids with an American woman. Amit Chowdhury a medical magazine writer marries a woman who is a nurse and older than him with whom he decides to grow old. He has two daughters who inherits more of her mother looks which gives more satisfaction to Amit as it helps him to omit his Indian past and come out of the trauma of his childhood of being left alone in America by his parents.

The story "Only Goodness" also reflects on the same theme where a Bengali educated family celebrates their American identity as their two children get admission in two very prestigious institutes in America. Sudha and Rahul's parents were proud to make successful life in America as their children makes them proud among Bengali community abroad by securing position in some prestigious institute of America. "After Rahul graduate from high school, their parents celebrated, having in their opinion now successfully raised two children in America."p-129. Sudha, the younger daughter being not born in America somehow feels a sense of lack and to compensate that she makes sure her brother gets every pleasure of an American kid as she helps him to unfold all dimension of American life. P-129.

Bharati Mukherjee a gem among diasporic female writers, in her very first collection, "Darkness" shows how her characters celebrate their American identity. "Angela "depicts a story of a girl call Angela who was raped and brutally suffered from breast mutation in Bangladesh , feels fortunate being adopted by an American family. Angela makes her life a mission to thank god for his kindness by saving lives of people. "Grace makes life spin. How else does a girl left for dead in Dhaka get the Bardons's farmhouse in Van Buren Country?"p-14

Mukherjee's second collection of short fictions "The Middleman and Other Stories" continues to celebrate the process of acculturation as her character Panna celebrates her newly found freedom in America who refuses to go back to India. Panna a married woman from Gujrat has come to America to get PhD in special education leaving her husband

behind. “I have left home, my husband , to get a Ph.D .in special ed.” Panna’s husband comes to take her back to India but in between that time “trucks have replaced lorries” in her vocabulary. Panna takes pride when she says, “I’ve broadened my horizons.” For Panna America means her freedom , her confidence where she discover herself as an subject and thus we see she ends up in telling her husband firmly that she cannot go back to India . “Special ed. Course in two years,” I remind him. “I can’t go back.”p-39.

Jasmine a Trinidadian girl in the story “Jasmine” takes many ordeals to be part of America realizes her country is too small for an ambitions girl like her. Jasmine reflects, “Trinidad was an island struck in the middle of nowhere. What kind of place was that for a girl with ambition?” Jasmine without visa, without any papers, leaving her family and her own country decides to cross borders to reach America, as she believes that America is a place full of bright future for a girl who is ambitious and ready to make a meaningful life.

In the last story of the collection, the very similar thing happens as Mrs Bhave in “ The Management of Grief’ too wishes to stay back in Canada after her husband’s death in search of inner peace and to assert her identity as a woman. Mrs Bhave very explicitly expresses the reason of her and her husband to start their life in Canada, as they always wanted to keep themselves out of the reach of dirty politics and religious controversies of Indian society to lead a life in peace. “We who stayed out of politics and came halfway around the world to avoid religious and political feuding have been the first in the New World to die from it.” P-195.

Bharati Mukherjee and JhumpaLahiri are two well-known diaspora writers with their bags full of awards for their contribution to diaspora writings. Jhumpa lahiri is an American writer from Indian Origin; hence, her India is creation of her borrowed memories from her parents, relatives, friends and, her short trips of childhood days. However, in comparison to lahiri’s world, Bharati Mukerjee’s India is more real with riots and gender biased ambience. Jhumpa’s characters sometimes longs more than Bharati’s for the sweet past which appears to be more real to them than the actual reality, like we see Mrs Sen from “Mrs Sen’s” who pines for her known ambit with beckoning hands of known peoples . However, Mukherjee’s characters with their overt desire to be part of the host culture, like Panna of “The Wife’s Story”, prolong stay in America to enjoy academic success as well as for individual freedom. Again there is Jasmine the eponymous character of the story “jasmine” who ends up feeling home at America confessing that her homeland Trinidad is too tiny for an ambitious girl like her.

To wind up it can be said, that it takes lot of courage to uproot oneself and to re-root again in an unknown land among unknown people. There remains anxiety regarding future, tussle between cultures, fear of rejection and discrimination, pain for separation, longing for past and desire for acceptance. In today’s globalised world, people are rushing from one corner of



globe to another to try their luck and in search of success, money and freedom. America with its amiable ambience for people of all religion and race has opened opportunity for all those to assimilate themselves who has qualification and intelligence to make their living in America. Its policies and tolerance for all religion and race makes it a place of dream that has attracted and will continue to attract people from all over world. Third world people with ambition to make their mark in America desperately yearn for assimilation in the host culture. However, occasionally sweet memories unsettle their minds with smell and taste of native food and climate yet generation of present era are trying their best to free themselves from pricking memories of their native land to find a place in the land which they themselves has chosen to spread their roots.

WORKS CITED

Lahiri, Jhumpa. Interpreter of Maladies. New Delhi: HarperCollins publishers.1999.Print.

- - - , Unaccustomed Earth. New Delhi:Random House.2008.Print.

Minzesheimer,Bob. “For Pulitzer Winner Lahiri, a Novel Approach.”USATODAY 19
Aug.2003.Web.19 Dec.2015.

Mukherjee, Bharati. Darkness. New York: Ballantine Books 1992. Print.

- - - , The Middleman and Other Stories. New Work:Grove Press 1988.Print.

Tagore, Rabindranath.Balaka.Trans. Tarapada Ghosh. Kolkata: Dasgupta and co.2002. Print.