

Diasporic Subjects in Multicultural World in Mukharjee's Stories

Kusum Ghimire *

Received: April 19, 2022

Accepted: May 26, 2022

Published: December 24, 2022

Abstract

The present paper argues that globalization has created diasporic subjects among immigrants communities as they go through a number of adjustment in the host culture. As recorded by Bharati Mukherjee in her story collection *Middleman and Other Stories* the protagonists have to constantly adopt and adapt new forms of hybridity in the US. With an advent of globalization, people started migrating into first world in search of better opportunities and social security, but the cultural differences always played a role in determining their identities. In other words, globalization opened the space for multiculturalism, and multiculturalism, in turn, bore diasporic subjects. This immigrants thus lived with an identity that they can't claim to be their own. They always struggle, constantly adopting and adapting a newer and newer form of identity negotiated heavily in a cross cultural setting.

Keywords: adjustment, globalization, identity, migration,

Introduction

This research paper analyzes Bharati Mukherjee's representation of diasporic subjects in the age of globalization. In her second volume of story collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1989), Mukherjee paints a range of experiences by the protagonists who come from Baghdad to India. Though belong to different socio-cultural situation, their experiences are similar for they bear the same identity: immigrant. Immigrant has become an identity that refers to a group of people who have left their country in search of better opportunities. Unlike expatriates who were "fleeing poverty or religious and political oppression" immigrants are as Mukherjee notes, "profoundly rooted in their countries of origin, whose bond to the land was sealed in blood" (Mukherjee, *Immigrant Writing* 681). In this paper, my purpose is to show how globalization breeds such conflicting subjects who live in foreign land and yet are rooted in the country of origin.

The term diasporic subjects designates an identity situation where a person is divided into two cultural locations: the country of origin and the county of landing. Edwidge Danticat situates the psychology of the immigrants as a location where “two very different countries are forced to merge within.” This forceful merger becomes a conscious phenomenon that the subject always recycles the process. Danticat further explains that “The language you were born speaking and the one you will probably die speaking have no choice but to find a common place in your brain and regularly merge there” (112). This constant need to merge and thus maintain a balance creates a new form of identity which is called diasporic subjects. Behind the creation of such subject, globalization has been an instrumental factor. Before the advent of globalization, the immigrants approached the identity differently. In fact, Mukherjee notes, “deliberate erasure [of location of origin] may have been possible, and even desirable” (681). But, in the Post War world scenario it has become impossible for the immigrants to erase the memory of the land they moved out for a specific reason like better opportunity.

Globalization, Migration and Identity

Globalization has opened a path of migration and brought along with it the woes of cultural adjustments. In fact, it has bred desire and subjects. In economic sense of the term, it connects the flows of products, services, labor, finance, information and ideas moving across national borders. This opening up the borders makes the migration possible.

A post-War approach to bring the wider world into its folds, the first world came up with the idea of open migration. Thus, globalization, for Philip McMichael, functions as an economic tool for the capitalists. Expressed in a form of development project, the primary purpose is to perpetuate the western economic agenda. He further clarifies:

Like any social construct, the institutions of the market economy are historically specific. . . . [And] mid-20th century capitalism was organized within the framework of the (now universal) nation-state system. . . [which] combined the principles of mercantilist and liberal organization into a new international regime of ‘embedded liberalism.’ Its extension to the so-called Third World, as the decolonization process unfolded, generated the paradigm of ‘developmentalism.’ (29)

Combined with the mercantilist objective, migration functions as a source of cheap labor in ever growing shortage of human resource in the capitalist world. Thus, McMichael points globalization is the historically specific project with economic agendas that serves the host countries to maintain economic upper hand.

In his book *Rethinking Globalization*, Nick Bisley highlights the importance of globalization in promoting wider social and cultural interactions and if works for the “the reduction in the significance of geography and geographic constraints to human interaction is fundamentally changing the structure of social interaction” (23). In terms of social transformation, globalization has compressed social space and time. He further argues “the collapse of distance and the rapid acceleration of communication that shows little regard for geographic constraints” (24) has opened up multicultural social settings. However, such settings are what breed diasporic identities. Unlike the old definition of dram land, “Immigrant lives are often chaotic, crowded and loud,” (684) Mukherjee rues. In “A Wife’s Story” the protagonist Panna Bhatt bears an identity that is quite un-Indian. Because, “Rules of decorum adhered to in the homeland are impossibly shuffled in the adopted land” (684). Bhatt lives in New York alone for her higher studies. Her indulgence in extra marital affairs is quite unacceptable. She befriends to Imre, another immigrant from Hungary who is also married and has two sons.

The public display of emotion, as she recounts, is a stark opposite to her culture back at home: “He staggers, though I weigh no more than 104 pounds, and with him, I pitch forward slightly. Then he catches me, and we walk arm in arm to the bus stop” (Mukherjee, *Middleman* 28). “Much is lost in migration” Mukherjee observes. And here the loss of culture has rendered Bhatt a person who adheres neither to her culture nor can fully accept the host culture. As she further thinks that “My husband would never dance or hug a woman on Broadway. Nor would my brothers” (28). A sense of guilt creeps into her. However, she enjoys the freedom available for her due to migration.

Migration has provided opportunity for cultural interaction. This is true. But, this is not without consequences. For example, in the beginning of the story Panna is a play by David Mamet with Imre, where a dialogue about the immigrants offends her: “They work hard, eat cheap, live ten to a room,

stash their savings under futons in Queens, and before you know it they own half of Hoboken" (25). The situation afterwards is shocking enough to create an ironic juxtaposition. The man sitting next to her nudges her while laughing in the same joke and even does not apologize. Despite Panna accepting their life style choices, doing something which her people won't do—she is not accepted as an equal. Her people, the Indians are mocked as monkey in the play, and they are laughing at her face.

In "Jasmine" the protagonist by the same name, migrates solely for economic reason. Her journey, in fact getting smuggled in a delivery van, from Trinidad. An illegal immigrant, Jasmine, she lives a liminal identity. She has an identity but not official verification. So she is none. She is free to establish her own identity. The point, here, is that the supply chain of commodity, a unique contribution of globalization, has opened up bizarre ways of migration like that of hiding oneself in the back of delivery van. And at the end of the story she adapts the cultural setting and owns an identity "that she forgot all the dreariness of her new life and gave herself up to it" (138). Jasmine gives herself to the ways of life there; she becomes one of them. The long and torturous travails she went through is a story of pain, suffering and loss. She is bound to transform herself into one of them, else she will always live without any identity. As Hyden argues in his book *Critical Theories of Globalization*, the world has entered into an unprecedented transformations: "we have entered a completely new, unrecognizable era of transformation in the direction of global economics, culture, and politics" (9). The result of such transformations will be like in Jasmine's case, "complex set of interconnecting relationships" (9) that have far reaching consequences. However, Vandererf finds it natural where low economies tend to move to higher economies. He observes, "The central arguments to reach this maximum are wages. Regions with a shortage of labor relative to capital have a high equilibrium wage, whereas regions with a large supply of labors relative to the endowment of capital are faced with low equilibrium wages" (96).

Jasmine in "Jasmine" and Panna in "Wife's Story" have some affinity in terms of identity. The former one goes to complete assimilation where the later one lives a liminal identity. Panna lives the freedom of American culture but with some reticence. Yet her inner self belongs to Indian culture which becomes evident once her husband lands to US. The evidence shows that no matter how hard people try to adopt new identity they can't give up the new identity altogether.

If assimilation is one form of identity in globalized culture, diaspora is another form of identity. Mukherjee's representation of diasporic identity comes by the title story "The Middleman" narrated by Alfie Judah, an immigrant from Bagdad. Diaspora, is a broad concept related to the experiences of the immigrants. Some immigrants deny going home due to various reasons. And few of them are as because there is no homeland to which to return. Even the homeland may exist but it is not a welcoming place politically, ideologically, socially. William Safran, in an article, "Diaspora in Modern Societies" contextualizes the meaning of diaspora in a wake of globalization. For him, it is a collective feeling of everyone who live in foreign culture. He elaborates:

Diaspora had a very specific meaning: the exile of the Jews from their historic homeland and their dispersion throughout many lands, signifying as well the oppression and moral degradation implied by that dispersion. But a unique phenomenon is not very useful for social scientists attempting to make generalizations. Today, "diaspora" and, more specifically, "diaspora community" seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people—expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities. (83)

Mukherjee has portrayed her protagonist Alfie as a middleman in two senses. Alfie presented as a middleman in his profession and also in his life. Alfie makes the surviving from whatever comes in the way. He has skills to live in a foreign world. He has connections with the underworld and supplies arms and information to them. Here he is acting as a middleman between the manufacturer and buyers. In the given hierarchy of men, the men referred to President Gutierrez and Clovis T. Ransome and below Alfie the hardworking natives. Yet, there is no space for him. His is the problem of color. Despite having a good position and financial status he is judged by his Middle East origin. He can't escape his location of departure, and color of his skin.

Globalization and diaspora have become interconnected ideas. The former one paves the path for migration, and in turn, forms the baseline for diaspora. Hence, diaspora is integrally associated with the notion of globalization. After migration when an immigrant arrives in a new country s/he becomes a part of a different culture. Immigrants have to identify and adjust themselves in

the alien culture. The impact of cultural transformation is so difficult that sometimes it travels along the generations creating further divisions in the identity process. Most of the immigrants pass through the torturous travail and transition from alienation to assimilation. Though, globalization has given rise to multiculturalism and multiculturalism has paved the ways for cross-cultural interaction between various cultures, the inflected identity still lingers among the migrants. The literary representation of such bifurcated identities make up the protagonist in Bharati Mukherjee's stories.

Conflicted Identities

In the three stories, "Jasmine," "Wife's Story" and "The Middleman" the protagonists struggle for locating their identity directly or indirectly stems from globalization. These stories reveal the trails of immigrants. These stories reveal the motive of people to move to America. The desire and situations that motivate them to move out of their country land them into a foreign land where they have to negotiate with a number of social, political, and cultural situations. In dealing with these, some of them assimilate in the new culture, where some of them try to form a new identity.

In the story "A Wife's Story," the protagonist attempts to adjust a number of factors in her new found life. For example, she changes her dresses which she liked and felt comfortable while she was going to receive her husband. She puts on an Indian attire while going to receive her husband, where she feels comfortable in western dress is an indication of her conflicted position. In other words, this is to hide her western way of life from her husband: "Tonight I should make up to him for my years away, the gutted trucks, the decree I'll never use in India. I want to pretend with him (the husband) that nothing has changed" (40). Her desire to appear an Indian woman as she was in India, which she has given up quite earlier is an indication of conflicted mental status. She ruminates further:

In the back of the cab, without even trying, I feel light, almost free. Memories of Indian destitute mix with the hordes of New York street people, and they float free, like astronauts, inside my head. I've made it. I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband, to get a Ph.D. in special ed. I have a multiple entry visa and a small scholarship for two years. After that, we'll see. 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. (28-29)

She was completely lured by the freedom of this new land. Panna feels proud while assimilated with the newness of new land. According to the dual labor theory of migration these pull-factors play a role behind her journey from all the way India to America. She expresses her mild disapproval behind her husband's business in India. She wanted him also to stay in the USA only. Her husband does not accompany her and continues to work in India. About the condition of his husband in India she says: "from Ahmedabad, a town of textile mills north of Bombay. My husband is a vice president at Lakshmi Cotton Mills. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, but LCM (Priv.), Ltd., is doing poorly" (31). Here by putting remarks on her husband's work back Bombay, she explicitly enforces the pull factors of migration. The facilities and opportunities available in America are more than they are in her homeland. Panna enjoys the freedom bestowed upon her by the American society. She draws a line between her life and the conservative life of her ancestors: "My mother was beaten by her mother-in-law, my grandmother, when she'd registered for French classes Alliance Francaise" (29). Panna is attracted to the American way of life and she wishes her husband also settle there with her.

Panna's attraction to American way of life and she relishing the freedom there comes with a cost of losing Indian tradition. Though she tries to maintain a sense of pride for her Indian culture and tradition. She is deeply hurt when David Mamet's play gives a vulgar comment about the Indian women. She could not bear this insult and raised a voice to protest against the tyranny of American dream. 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 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, racists, and antisocial. The actors wouldn't make it off stage. This play, and all these awful feelings, would be safely locked up. (26)

It shows her sense of Indian diaspora in new land. Panna had not seen the colonial era. Otherwise she would have calmly accepted this insult but she revolted it being diaspora. Panna's husband expects her to wear Sari and not pants. He remarks after seeing a tourist officer flirting with his wife: "I told you not to wear pants. He thinks you are Puerto Rican. He thinks he can treat you with disrespect" (36). This comparison between Indian

women as pure and other women as promiscuous is the consciousness of diaspora. They wanted to adopt the culture of the new land but by making their own culture alive. In days to come the Indian diaspora will be seen on a social and cultural level in the foreign land.

Husband's visit to New York resembles a romantic upcoming along with the tensions to the narratives. She finds herself in a trouble and expresses her dilemma by showing her confusion. Whether to enjoy the freedom and romance with husband or restrict under the domination of husband? It shows us the clear picture of the migrants in the new land. He brings patriarchal domination again back to the narrator's life. And it creates sudden misunderstanding between them and forced them to think about happenings. It breaks the process of questioning gender roles and norms which Panna has started. Mr. Bhatt does not accept reversal of gender roles comfortably. Panna react it ambivalently:

"He looks disconcerted. He's used to a different role. He's the knowing, suspicious one in the family. He seems to be sulking, and finally he comes out with it. "You've said nothing about my new glasses." I compliment him on the glasses, how chic and Western-executive they make him looks. But I can't help the other things, necessities until he learns the ropes. I handle the money, buy the tickets. I don't know if this makes me unhappy". (33)

Panna comes to know new aspects of her husband's personality. Even in New York, undoubtedly she dislikes his patriarchal approach to control her. But she starts liking him in the newly established intimacy in New York. Before Mr. Bhatt returns to India, Panna's personal feeling of wonder suggests that she likes her transformation: "In the mirror that hangs on the bathroom door, I watch my naked body turn, the breasts, the thighs glow. The body's beauty amazes. I stand there shameless, in ways he has never seen me. I am free, afloat, watching somebody else" (40). Watching somebody else means she sees herself as new woman, an immigrant. She presents herself from becoming to being here, and, it's a complete transformation for her.

Jasmine is a girl with no visa or passport. She decides to work with Trinidadian family: "Her daddy had told her to talk to the Daboos first

chance" (128). The present status of Daboos is: "the Daboos were nobodies back home. They were lucky that's all. They'd gotten here before the rush and bought up a motel and an ice cream parlor" (128). Trinidadian diaspora here makes her easy to adjust during very early days in America. After shifting to Ann Arbor as "Mother's helper" (131) her kitchen experience is: "In the early evenings Jasmine cooked supper, something special she hadn't forgotten from her island days" (136). Bringing something with themselves and practicing those things in new land symbolizes diaspora consciousness.

Her situation is explicitly clear when she accepts her new job. It was during her dealing about a new job with Bill Moffitt and his wife Lara. As Lara is a performance artist, she remains too busy into performance rehearsals so that Jasmine might have to help out with the housework and cooking. Here she was: "...all right with her, Jasmine said, maybe a little too quickly" (131). She becomes nostalgic here by hiding her identity and family status: "This wasn't the time to say anything about Ram, the family servant. Americans like Moffitts wouldn't understand about keeping servants" (ibid). She just spends a few words which speak in favor of the condition: "She explained she came from a big family and was used to heavy-duty cooking and cleaning" (131). This situation literally shows the condition of immigrants in foreign land.

Mukherjee has portrayed her female protagonist as an adventurer who is ready to pay any price to realize her desire to be in America. Moreover she reflects: "She was thinking this as they made love on the Turkish carpet in front of the fire: she was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate. No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future" (138). The condition of immigrants is shown clearly in this story. There is one more striking line showing comparison between family servants back in home and the situation of Jasmine in new land: "Ram and she weren't in similar situation" (138). How easily they handle the situation and transform themselves into the new one is remarkable here. There are various factors which prove differences among them but the situation molded her in the role of Ram here. For Jasmine her sexual encounter with Bill is not exploitation rather she considers it as her gateway into the future. She doesn't at all feel

exploited instead of it she seems to like Bill and during seduction she is more composed than him. Mukherjee was so fascinated by this character that later on she makes her the heroine of her next novel, *Jasmine*. In the novel Jasmine says, "There are no harmless, compassionate ways to make oneself. . . . We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the images of dreams" (29).

Mukherjee shows how immigrants work in two ways: creating chances for a better future as well as breeding loneliness and pain in multicultural land. To create opportunities for a better future Mukherjee has skillfully shown the complexities of contemporary life in America. Women characters are portrayed negatively and positively both. Positively means their roles are challenging the dogma of patriarchal superiority. They act as a kind of gender reversal way. Women act in the lead role and act as the front seat drivers pushing their male counterparts to the back seat. It is the transformation they achieved in foreign land which ends stories with happy endings. The negative aspect of their portrayal is their representation as commodity sometimes. This collection establishes migrants' survival to make their way in the new world defined by differing and bewildering. Mukherjee produces the picture of a mixed blessing for those individuals.

Conclusion

Mukherjee has consciously or unconsciously made *The Middleman and Other Stories* as her best manifestation of the odyssey of migration experienced by the immigrants. Mukherjee has created a wide range of characters from different social, cultural, economic classes and different national origins. She draws out the pain and dilemma of the protagonists from various perspectives. They all are concerned about the barriers they encounter in their journey of life on the alien land. Some of them are caught between the barriers and they are unable to come out of it while others are struggling hard to find a way out. The author has highlighted in her writings that these barriers can be crossed. They move away being a rebel against the complexities and become able to manage everything with happy endings. Thus, Mukherjee has tried to emphasize on the racial and cultural discrimination faced by the Third World immigrants in America.

Works Cited

- Arango, Joaquin. "Explaining Migration: A Critical View," *International Social Science Journal*, vol.52, no. 165, 2000, pp. 283-296. *Wily Online Library*, doi: www.doi.org/10.1111/1468-2451.00259
- Bisley, Nick. *Rethinking Globalization*. Palgrave, 2007.
- Carchidi, Victoria. "'Orbiting': Bharati Mukherjee's Kaleidoscope Vision.'" *MELUS*, vol. 20, 995, pp. 91-101. *JSTOR*, doi.org/10.2307/467892.
- Drake, Jennifer. "Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1999, pp. 60-84. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1208819
- Ember, M. *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures around the World*. Springer Science + Business Media,k.
- Hayden, P. *Critical Theories of Globalization*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006
- Lane, J. Richard. *Global Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Routledge, 2013. pp. 860-885.
- McMichael, Philip. "Globalization: Myths and Realities". *Rural Sociology*, vol. 61 no.1, 1996, p. 29.
- Mukharjee, Bharati. *Middleman and Other Stories*. Grove, 1988.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature." *American Literary History*, vol.23, no. 3, 2011, pp. 680-696. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41237461.
- Reich, Simon. *What is Globalization? Four Possible Answers*. Kellogg Institute: The Hellen Kellogg Institute for International Studies, Working Paper #261 – December 1998.
- Safran, William. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return. *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1991, *Project Muse*, 10.1353/dsp.1991.0004
- Vandererf, Rob. *Causes of International Migration*. Luxembourg. , 1995, pp. 91-6.