

# Asian Resonance

## Word Unheard : Empowerment Through Voice/Language in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction



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### Abstract

*...East and West will meet from two opposite sides and merge in each other and found in the life of a unified humanity a common world - culture. Sri Aurobindo.*

Mukherjee's fiction is a dramatization of the East-West encounter. In this chapter I argue that Mukherjee's fictional vision favours dialectical pluralism, where diversity is encouraged. The cultural interface involves the characters in a situation of tension, a situation where they are engaged in a dialogic confrontation with the "other". The process leads them to a deeper level of consciousness which helps them to overcome the "self-other" dichotomy. Here I argue that though the confrontation appears to be conflictual it is actually dialogic in nature. The cultural interface attained through 'voice' is mutually invigorating, where each strengthens the other, where inequities of diversity are remedied. The encounter with the "other". (may it be the person or his/her culture) involves a moral responsibility. It is a transforming experience both for the self and the other.

**Keywords:** Other, Othering, Voice, Narrative, Empowerment, Motif, Silence.

### Introduction

Foucault holds that "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and in so far as they are free.... Where the determining factors saturate the whole, there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains" (Foucault 221). Although the Mukherjee characters are not slaves they are taken to be socially inferior to the white American. Their philosophy has been to achieve social mobility like others. In order to achieve this they often find themselves in a combative relationship with the adversary. It sounds paradoxical, if not contradictory, when I say that the combative relationship is conflictual and yet dialogic in nature. Like the blacks, they do not believe in protest and rebellion overtly. However, they want to be in a "power relationship" with the white consequently it leads to what Foucault would call "agonism" - "a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal initiation and struggle ... [a situation of] permanent provocation" (Foucault 1982: 222). In her fiction Mukherjee demonstrates how her protagonists incite "the other" into a power relationship through 'voice' and 'language'.

### Review of Literature

María Luz González Rodríguez points out that Bharati Mukherjee "envisions herself as a pioneer of new lands and literatures, initiating a process of re-forming and de-forming American culture, and redefining diaspora as a process of unhyphenated rehousement in which the cultural landscape in which one lives is no longer divided into a centre and its peripheries. Mukherjee celebrates "racial and cultural mongrelisation" but rejects cultural balkanization in its defence of the local over the national. She is neither ignorant nor insensitive to racism and oppression in the United States, yet her characters are always tenacious and feisty in their struggle to belong. Mukherjee stresses their quality as battlers, moved by the instinct to improve their lives. ( Bharati Mukherjee's Struggle Against Cultural Balkanization: the Forging of a New American Immigrant Writing. *Indialogs. Spanish Journal of Indian Studies.* 2, pp. 72 - 92. January 2015)

### Objective of the Study

Many of Mukherjee's fiction use voice as a recurrent motif for transculturation. The essay seeks to study how Mukherjee uses 'voice' and 'language' as important tools of negotiation with the other as well as for

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social empowerment in an alien culture. For any sort of power relation to be functional between cultures or human beings the first and foremost requirement is to start from a common platform; that is for the one to consider the other as "another human being" and belonging to "another culture" which may have elements widely diverse from one's own.

To make my point clear I reproduce an experience of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, as narrated by her to Sneha Gunew during a conversation on "Questions of Multiculturalism". Travelling from London to Canada with a U.S. resident alien visa, she was refused entry into Air Canada.

Air Canada says to me: 'we cannot accept you. ....I had to stay another day, and telephone Canada and tell them that I could not give my seminar. I said to the woman finally before I left in some bitterness: "Just let me tell you one small thing : "Don't say we can't accept you", that sounds very bad from one human being to another; next time you should say: "The regulations are against it"; then we are both victims." And the woman looked at me with such astonishment because, in Heathrow, a coloured woman wearing a sari does not speak to a white woman like this. (Spivak and Gunew, 201)

Spivak of course, endorses the point I made earlier; demonstrating how she incited the woman at the airport to a "power relationship" by way of making the perpetrator feel guilty of treating her as a 'non-human'. Spivak's narration also suggests how speech can empower one to fight against discrimination, thereby, pressing one's claim to equality. However, if the purpose of speech is to communicate, alternative non-verbal modes of communication can become equally potent. Even violence, as in the case of the blacks in America, can be a mode of communication. The Mukherjee characters, we find, adopt various means to put "spectacular pressure" on the dominant culture not only to tolerate them as "the wilted plumage of intercontinental vagabondage" but to accept them as "New Age Americans" all set to change the landscape of this country (Mukherjee).

Mukherjee appears to say that voice and language are "self-empowering" and can become necessary prerequisites to prevent being "otherized" and "objectified". In explicating his relationship between poetry and politics Adrienne Rich has something similar to say in 'What Is Found There':

... the imagining of different reality requires telling and retelling the terrible true story .... What is represented as intolerable – as crushing - becomes the figure of its own transformation ... (247- 48).

More often than not the characters in Mukherjee discover that they cannot live in and be encompassed by a culture – in this case the American - without entering into some form of interaction with it. Such interaction that can lead to an ongoing dialogue resulting in a mutually transforming experience. It is only through dialogue that as Said puts it, "Exiles (can) cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (Said, *The Mind of Winter*). However

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such interaction is neither always possible nor always successful. The dialogic interaction takes place at different levels and assumes multiple modes. Voice/language is an important aspect of the cultural debate that Mukherjee dramatizes in her fiction. In this chapter I seek to explore and explain how Mukherjee makes a case for her characters drawing on these two aspects and would like to argue that in any encounter, "voice" is crucially important. It is, therefore, important that we study how Mukherjee novelizes "voice". For it is only when their "voice" gets a serious hearing that the Mukherjee protagonists enter into some kind of "power relationship" with the other.

If we take a glance at certain early African-American narratives, we realize that the politics of articulation was very popular among the black writers. There are several tropes that emphasize the correlation between silence and Blackness. More importantly this stresses the urgent need to produce a voice in the black text that would be an "instrument of transformation" The Spivak context mentioned earlier supports this view. I hold that by using speech as a mode of power the Mukherjee protagonist effaces the ideological constraints involved in the immigrant-settler situation, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim believes 'language can be a powerful weapon. Geok Lin-Lim says:

Language gives indiscriminately to every human inherent abilities to shape, to manipulate, express, inform; to protest, to empower one's self in the world. So... [I] hold fast to the First Amendment of the [American] constitution; I represent that freedom of speech guaranteed to every United States citizen, where freedom of speech is defined not solely as a political right but as a metaphysical condition : the inalienable human condition of access to language. (14)

Lim, however, goes on to say that speech in order is to have an impact requires an 'audience' without which it remains impotent. She says:

But the condition of freedom constituted by our human access to language has another dimension, the freedom inherent in speech. even when accompanied by political freedom of speech, which is always and everywhere constrained, means nothing if access to an audience is absent. Thus the human birthright of speech can be made mute, silenced by sociopolitical structures. Language achieves little if it is denied listeners. One may express, create, discover, but how does one move, inform, persuade, protest without an audience? How can speech give the speakers access to social power without social permission.

Thus Mukherjee's characters seem to wrestle with the idea of how "language" and 'speech' enfranchises and disenfranchises them. Her story "Hindus", for example, uses language as a metaphor for an imposed sense of "otherness." In the urbane settings of Toronto and New York some people carelessly confuse Hindi (the language) with Hindu

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(the religion). Leela, a Bengali Brahmin, is alert to such insults, intended or unintended. She begins to see language as a new caste system when, in an art dealer's office, she is complimented for knowing "Hindu". Her American acquaintance Lisa, overhearing a conversation between her and an Indian Writer Pat, comments:

I had no idea you spoke Hindu. It's eerie to think you can speak such a hard language. I'm having trouble enough with French. I keep forgetting that you haven't lived here always." (121)

This dismissive attitude allows the dominant culture to adopt a casual manner showing disrespect both for the language and the religion. Leela knows what these slights mean, "That slight undetectable error, call it an accent, is not part of language at all. I speak Hindu. No matter what language I speak it will come out slightly foreign. no matter how perfectly I mouth it. There is a whole world of us now, speaking Hindu" (121) Comparing the works of Bharati Mukherjee and Japanese Canadian writer Joy Kogawa. B.A. St. Andrews writes :

[The] forbidding sense that words can imprison as well as release is a keystone for writers. Like Mukherjee in her short-story collection *Darkness* (1985), which contains "Hindus". Kogawa begins her novel *Obasan* (1981) by focusing on the problem of language. Kogawa asks what are the consequences of silence and of speech. "The word is stone", the narrator Naomi Nakane says, adding: Unless the stone burst with the telling, unless the seed flower with Speech, there is in my life no living word'. This lyric opening passage establishes the connections between language and justice. between telling and silencing ... *Obasan* examines the trials and triumphs of Japanese Canadians during and after World War II. Reinforcing this imposed silence is the Asian virtue of quiet forbearance. Kogawa suggests that the virtues inherent in her people - *enryō* (reserve), *gamen* (patience), and *shikataga - nai* (resignation)- have become weapons turned against them.... In telling this poignant and patriotic story. Kogawa... also issues a quiet warning: these same indignities could be suffered by any particular tribe at any particular moment in cultural history. To remain silent in the face of elaborate social injustice is to will some other group to suffer a similar and unjust fate: dispersal. denigration, dehumanization. (57)

Mukherjee too warns society about this tactic of imposing silence or of using language to misrepresent experience. The stories "Isolated incidents" and "Tamurlaine" show how through its news-papers, legal system, and historical records society absolves itself of any suffering inflicted upon its minority communities. Yet, through a deeper reading of these two stories, one can gauge Mukherjee's ironical intent: that a voice of protest,

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however small or insignificant it may be, is bound to evince a reaction one way or another. In "Isolated Incidents" the protagonist. Ann Vane, working for the Human Rights, has to register a number of cases of violent incidents of assault on immigrants in the subway, as well as racial discrimination at the Universities. "They came to her, couriering, crying, thundering, insulting-" and "Police treated it as simple assault, rowdiness, and drew no necessary inferences regarding race. No witnesses, no case, and "Police involvement ended." (71) Yet, in spite of government apathy Ann finds it difficult to ignore such injustice.

The snowy gleam of fluorescence helped; it stamped out feelings and faces, it miniaturized passions, like a television screen. Hand in hand with January, it helped her accept imperfections in the world, her own limitation. On good days it would have seemed an academic distinction. Statistically, where would you rather be ? Aesthetically, which subway would you prefer to ride? But on bad days, judgements curled up at her from a thousand scraps of paper and she could only tell herself that if all these recommendations, all this paperwork, all this good sense and reason were not influencing something, she would quit. (71-72)

Ann's guilt-ridden confessions prove that these shrill voices" of protest cannot be ignored forever and that no society can cling long" to an outdated, static version of itself," Andrews says that the danger of this static version is clearly stated in Carol Ann Howell's study *Private and Fictional Words*: such an abandonment of any groups in the multicultural mosaic makes them "displaced persons in their own country. If Kogawa's book is a lyric warning that all immigrants must be wary of disenfranchisement based on colour and culture, Mukherjee's collection is an equally grim reminder" (57)

Sometimes language also becomes a medium through which the 'other' is victimized. In "A Wife's Story" for example, a play written by David Mamet is enacted to humiliate Indians : The acquisitive Patels, their women clad in their heavy silk and gold, "look like they have just been fucked by a dead cat" (26). But the protagonist, an Indian woman "Panna", a graduate student who is watching the play, stubbornly refuses to walk out.

Expensive girls' schools in Lausanne and Bombay have trained me to behave well. My manness are exquisite, my feelings are delicate. my gestures refined, my moods undetectable. They have seen me through riots, uprooting separation, my son's death. The fat man looks at us. The woman looks too, and shushes.

I stare back at the two of them. Then I stare, mean and cool, at the man's elbow. Under the bright blue polyester Hawaiian shirt sleeve, the elbow looks soft and runny. "Excuse me." I say. My voice has the effortless meanness of well-bred displaced Third-World women, though my rhetoric has

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been learned elsewhere. "You are exploiting my space." (27)

The words spoken here may appear to be just polished angry retort, but have a much larger implication. Mukherjee seems to say that as a legal immigrant to the U.S. Panna has as much right to have her private space, and no one, not even a naturalized American citizen, has a right to encroach upon that space. Panna, (and through her Mukherjee) obviously is speaking on behalf of the Patels, Indians as well as all those who have voluntarily accepted this country as their homeland. In *Women. Native. Other.* Trinh. T. Minh-ha powerfully echoes the value of "voicing" by the immigrant woman :

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal- relocation-reeducation, redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality. your voice-you know. And often cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't, they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said. (80)

Commenting on Mukherjee's transformation from an embittered writer-in-exile (in *Darkness*) into a celebrant of the immigrant experience (in *Middleman and Other stories*) Polly Shulman Wrote in the "Village Voice" (June 7, 1988), "The change came upon her suddenly... and it is easy to pick out the earlier stories in *Darkness*. 'Hindus' and 'The World According to Hsiii' seem diffuse, full of frustrated anger. 'Isolated Incidents' about Paki-bashing in Toronto, is almost pedantic; ... Mukherjee is addressing people she knows are not listening, so she [as her characters] has to shout a little to be heard. The newer stories though, make up for these lapses." Unlike the anxiety-ridden figures in *Darkness*, The Third World immigrants in *The Middleman and Other Stories* who speak are not "made mute, silenced by socio-political structures and are "(not) denied listeners".

The eponymous heroine Jasmine for instance is an extraordinarily resourceful young woman from Trinidad who obtains a job as a nanny in the home of a Michigan Family. "She was a bright, pretty girl with no visa, no papers, and no birth certificate." she tells herself and the reader. "No nothing other than what she wanted to invent and tell. She was a girl rushing wildly into the future" (138). When asked by her employer Lara, about her hometown, Port-or-Spain, she thinks: "There was nothing to tell about her hometown that would not shame her in front of nice white American folk like the Moffits. The place was shabby, the people were grasping and cheating and lying and life was full of despair and drink and wanting. But by the time she finished, the island sounded romantic". Lara said, "It would not surprise me one bit if you were a writer, Jasmine." (132). No doubt Jasmine is a "writer", one who writes her past and her present in order to "re-write" "herself" in the future just as she will help re-write the life of the Moffits, her American employers. Like most of Mukherjee's characters, Jasmine has no thoughts of turning back. Such grit and determination is also shown by the protagonist of the novel Jasmine,

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who keeps changing her identity through her journey from Punjab to Iowa.

Jasmine is more than a novel about survival. It is also an account of an immigrant south Asian Woman's metamorphosis, self-invention, and self-empowerment. In India the protagonist has two names suggestive of the two conflicting cultures of the subcontinent: "Jyoti is a Hindi and Hindu name, whereas Jasmine is a Persian-Arabic and Moslem name: respectively the names mean "light" and "Sweetness", the two elements Mathew Arnold thought could save culture from enarchy" (Chua. 58). Ironically, Jasmine's arrival in America begins with a proof of the anarchy that exists in America as she is raped by Half-Face, Helped by a good samaritan Lilian Gordon who taught Jasmine to "Walk American and talk American" she sets out on her journey into America. Thereon Jasmine is faced with three options. First to remain as a resigned Indian widow at prof. Vadhera's house, in the Indian Ghetto of Queens. New York; second to live with Taylor, whose American wife had left him in "search of happiness", and third with Bud the crippled Iowa banker. as his wife. At the end of the novel Jasmine decides to run away with Taylor, leaving Bud who had given her shelter and whose baby she was carrying.

The ending has been interpreted variously as "shirking of responsibilities", "selfishness", "unethical" and an attitude of "laissez- faire" which is seen as synonymous with her Americanization. However, I maintain that Jasmine's decision to flee with Taylor stems from her choice between "silence" and "eloquence". Both Prof Vadhera and Bud want to silence her in their own way. At Prof Vadher's she has to enact the role of a silent unprotesting docile Indian widow doomed to a life of "serving hot pakodas and watching pirated videos of Hindi movies." She says: "Flushing, with all its immigrant services at hand, frightened me. who had every reason to fear America, was intrigued by the city and the land beyond the rivers." (128). For Bud, on the other hand, she is an exotic Maharani. Of their first encounter Bud says: "You were glamour, something unattainable" (177). But, Bud is shy of delving into her past. Jasmine's "genuine foreignness frightens him" (22). She is "darkness. mystery, inscrutability" (178) and "He is always uneasy with tales of Hasnapur, just like Mother Riplemeyer. It is as though Hasnapur is an old husband or lover. Even memories are a sign of disloyalty" (206) Thus here too Jasmine is silenced. She has to conform to the expectations of her lover. As Timothy Ruppel puts it - "Bud's desire manifests itself in the will to possess and to define. Jasmine has learned a different lesson from history" (188).

At each of these places Jasmine will remain incomplete like "Half-Face" her rapist, half of whose face is burnt and therefore non-existent, At Flushing she has to deny that self which is eager to be Americanized and with Bud she has to deliberately hide her "Indian self". It is only Taylor, her ex-lover who makes her feel whole", who accepts her as she is. Taylor did not want to change me. He did not want to scour and sanitize the foreignness. My being different from Wylie or Kate did not scare him (165)."

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Thus Taylor becomes a metaphor for eloquence, for change, a meeting ground between Jasmine the Indian and Jasmine the American. In choosing Taylor she has chosen "movement over stasis". To Karin, Bud's ex-wife, she says, "I am not leaving Bud".... "I am going somewhere." (214) She prefers the perfumed Jasmine" to the "stench" of the "waterlogged carcass of a small dog" in Hasnapur that had been haunting her since childhood. Jasmine's relationship with Taylor is based on mutual understanding and acceptance of difference. As Trin T. Minh- ha puts it :

The understanding of difference is a shared responsibility which requires a minimum of willingness to reach out to the unknown. (85)

With Taylor Jasmine decides to reach out to the unknown "greedy with wants and reckless from hope" (Jasmine 214). By asserting herself Jasmine has access to social power-the power to refashion herself as well as the other.

#### Conclusion

Transformative elements in Mukherjee's fiction underscores the idea of a mutually enriching dialogue. In fact, in the beginning of this chapter, I referred to the idea of "dialogic pluralism" I meant thereby, multiculturalism and not ethnic pluralism. My study reveals how Mukherjee places into conversation two cultures, one from the margin and one from the centre. Through this dialogue she redefines and revivifies culture in America. Culture, as it is presented in her fiction has become one of the staples of mainstream American identity. In fact, it has become the norm of an "already decentred system". Mukherjee tales have assumed a new dimension and project a new vision : the belief that multicultural America is capable of reflecting a polycultural globe. Her fiction offers a two-way communicative structure through mutual interaction between cultures.

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