

## Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness*: Showcasing Experiences of the South Asian Diaspora

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**Abstract :** Bharati Mukherjee's *Darkness*, a collection of short stories published in 1985, chronicles the experiences of South Asians who lived in Canada and the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. The stories also reflect Mukherjee's understanding of the attitude of Canada and the USA towards the South Asian diaspora. Canada and the USA are open for citizenship to immigrants on fulfilling certain necessary criteria set by the countries. The comparatively flexible citizenship facilities, the large, open job market and the world's best educational institutes of these countries attract hundreds of people every year from different countries of the world. Many of them gradually succeed in obtaining citizenship there and try to acculturate. Nevertheless, immigrants in these countries often go through some unusual experiences which remind them that they are non-natives. This essay attempts to examine the experiences of the South Asian Diaspora living in the USA and Canada in the 1970s and 1980s as reflected in Mukherjee's short stories published in the volume titled *Darkness*.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, Canada's multiculturalism, USA's melting pot, acculturation and settlement.

### Introduction

Mukherjee's *Darkness* has twelve short stories of which four were written when she lived in Canada and the rest she wrote after having migrated to the USA. The stories are important to understand the status of the South Asian Diaspora in Canada and the USA as well as Canada's and the USA's attitude towards the South Asian Diaspora who lived there in the 1970s and 1980s. The stories are also important in that they—particularly those that are directly based on the bitter experiences that Mukherjee had met in Canada—clearly bring out the flaws that were masked in Canada's policy of multiculturalism and at the same time present a comparative study between Canada's policy of multiculturalism and the USA's melting pot policy of that time. From her experiences of living in both Canada and the USA, Mukherjee found the USA's melting pot policy more conducive to South Asian immigrants. This realization of

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Mukherjee that she derived from her experiences of living in Canada and America has served as the background of her *Darkness* stories.

### **Aims and Objectives of the Study**

To achieve knowledge about the status and experiences as well as countries' attitude towards the South Asian Diaspora who lived in Canada and the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. Qualitative data will be extracted from observation of the experiences of characters in Bharati Mukherjee's short stories published in the book titled *Darkness*. And Mukherjee's own experiences of living as a Diaspora in Canada and the US, as revealed in her interviews and essays are used. Data extracted thus from Mukherjee's short stories will be crosschecked with other reliable sources to verify if what Mukherjee says through her fictional characters is authentic.

### **Research Methodology**

This research followed a qualitative method extracting data, not directly from any living Diaspora, but from observation of the experiences of imaginary South Asian Diaspora characters portrayed in Mukherjee's short stories collected in the book titled *Darkness*. To understand and analyse the experiences of the characters, different literary and cultural theories were applied. Relevant state documents of Canada and the US about their attitude towards the Diaspora were also consulted. As the subjects were imaginary people portrayed in fictional literary pieces, they could not be interviewed directly, and so their recurrent life experiences were used as tools to understand their status and the countries' attitude towards them.

### **Mukherjee's Realization as a Diaspora**

Born in an extended Hindu family in Calcutta and completing her education up to MA from Indian universities, Mukherjee migrated to Canada with her Canadian husband Clark Blaise in 1968 and became a naturalized citizen there in 1972. She gave birth to two children by Clerk Blaise and lived with them for about 14 years in Canada, yet she failed to be a Canadian. Despite being married to a Canadian husband and being the mother of two Canadian children she had to experience the feelings of an expatriate due to the implied discriminatory tendency in Canada's policy of multiculturalism that viewed immigrants more as expatriates than citizens. Mukherjee expressed her feelings about how she was treated in Canada thus:

In Canada, I was frequently taken for a prostitute or shoplifter, frequently assumed to be domestic, praised by the astonished auditors that I didn't have a singsong accent. The society itself, or important elements in that society, routinely made crippling assumptions about me, and about my "kind". (*Darkness*, 2)

The period of her 14 year-stay in Canada was the hardest time of her life, as she found herself discriminated against and treated as a member of "visible minority" (*Darkness*, 2). What Mukherjee blamed for this miserable status of immigrants,

particularly of South Asian origins in Canada, was the introduction of a policy called 'Green Paper on Immigration and Population' in 1975, a policy that technically strengthened the host nation's culture, preventing the so-called invisible minority cultures from assimilating into the mainstream. This immigration policy, as Mukherjee found from her own experience and research, made Canada hostile to its immigrants, resulting in violence and racist reactions against South Asians. Mukherjee's assessment seems true when we see that a Bangladeshi diaspora in Canada named Abdur Rahim also voices the same feeling about Canada's attitude towards the South Asian Diaspora. Abdur Rahim writes that "their everyday experience in Canada involves subtle racism and other forms of discrimination which adversely affect their integration into Canada's social and economic mainstream" (24). According to Mukherjee, Canada's policy of multiculturalism ironically implies that an immigrant belongs more to his or her community than to the state and therefore the problem of an immigrant is his or her own, not the state's. This hostile and indifferent attitude of Canada towards the problems and expectations of South Asian immigrants seems to have been prompted by such assumption that there are tendencies of "extremism and radicalization amongst various diaspora communities . . . [which] have a long history of producing violence in Canada and can rapidly import conflict to Canada's shores" (Parent & Ellis 6). The Air India jet plane crash of 1985 perpetrated by some Indian Sikhs strengthened this assumption of Canada about the diaspora, particularly of South Asian origins. The tragic airliner crash killed all "329 passengers and crew, mostly Canadians of Indian ancestry" (Chakraborty, Para I). But most shockingly, Canada did not acknowledge it as a Canadian tragedy, rather took it for an Indian tragedy, thinking that those killed in the plane crash were not natives of Canada but naturalised Canadian citizens of Indian origin. Even the then Canadian Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, "succumbed to that misdirected reflex, phoning his counterpart in India to express Canada's condolences" (Brethour, Para II).

Mukherjee's investigative book *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Hunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* that she wrote in collaboration with her husband digs out the real causes of the 1985 airliner tragedy. Their research finds the tragedy actually rooted in Canada's immigration policy. According to Mukherjee and Blaise, due to the discriminatory attitude of Canada to South Asians, Indian Sikhs could not assimilate into the new culture and could not make Canada their home. As a result, despite living in Canada for decades, they remained tied to the Sikhs' movement in India for an independent state for themselves. If Canada had provided the Sikhs with equal opportunities and treated them as Canadian citizens without awarding them a "low-profile marginality" status (*Sorrow and Terror*, 205), they would not have remained involved in Indian Sikhs' politics and would not have masterminded the terrorist plane crash in 1985. Therefore, the Air India jet plane tragedy perpetrated by the Sikhs, Mukherjee and Blaise found, had been "a long time in the making"

(*Sorrow and Terror*, 74) and was actually “an immigration tragedy with terrorist overtones” (*Sorrow and Terror*, ix).

Canada even slighted the achievements and talents of South Asians, who were actually “an object of hate for the disgruntled sections of the white community who could make immigrants from the subcontinent responsible for everything from unemployment to overcrowding to over taxation” (Alam 339). Perhaps, this slighting attitude towards South Asians prevented Canada from finding Mukherjee as a significant writer although she had written by that time two famous novels, *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971)—a novel that epitomises the problems of cultural derooting and rerooting of the Indian diaspora, and *Wife* (1975) —a polemical novel that caused a widespread controversy in her native land and in the Indian diaspora communities in Canada, the USA and elsewhere. She had also co-authored a book of non-fiction with her husband, and written some short stories that were initially published in different little magazines in Canada. Immigrants, thus, were second grade citizens in Canada, ignored and deprived of many privileges enjoyed by the mainstream population. For Mukherjee, the policy of multiculturalism was hypocritical as it, instead of equalizing different ethnic communities, discriminated against the non-native citizens and forced them to believe that they were expatriates. Mukherjee wrote in the introduction to her short story book called *Darkness* that “the country proudly boasts of its opposition to the whole concept of cultural assimilation” (2). This hostile, racist and discriminatory attitude of Canada towards the South Asian Diaspora triggered by the country’s policy of multiculturalism was the chief concern of some of Mukherjee’s short stories in *Darkness*.

### **Textual Analysis**

At least three short stories in the *Darkness* collection—“Isolated Incidents,” “Tamurlane” and “The World according to Hsu”—aptly reflect the status of the South Asian diaspora in Canada. Feeling derooted from the homeland’s culture and living virtually as foreigners in the new country which more than often psychologically tortured immigrants who had left their motherlands for a golden future in Canada were the predicaments of South Asians there. The above mentioned three stories deal with such experiences of South Asians in Canada. They also reflect both Canada’s attitude towards South Asians and South Asians’ attitude towards Canada. What is clearly understood from these stories is that Canada treated South Asians as “others” and kept aloof from them, and on the other hand, South Asians were forced to be aloof from assimilation into Canadian culture. Hence these stories deal with what Mukherjee has termed as “aloofness of expatriation” (*Darkness*, 1).

“Isolated Incidents” in the *Darkness* collection is a story representing very categorically Canadian outlook to the problems of immigrants. As shown in the story, what is a serious problem to immigrants is an isolated incident to Canada. Thus the country ignored the problems and pains of immigrants and regarded the issues causing problems to them as isolated incidents. The story presents how in an

officially sponsored indifferent manner a white Canadian official named Ann Vane responds to the cases of immigrants. Two specific cases of racial discriminations are brought to her notices, but she, instead of assuring the victims of any legal redress, feels irritated at the complains and finally completes her duty by simply recording the cases. A Canadian of Indian origin named Doctor. (Miss) Supariwala complains to Ann Vane of being racially discriminated in a job interview. Dr. Supariwala is a competent candidate with doctorates from Western Ontario and Bombay, having published numerous articles, and the board finds her discipline and preparedness beyond question, yet she is denied the job showing a completely baseless ground that “students would not relate easily to her, some might complain of her accent, her methodological stiffness, her lack of humour” (*Darkness*, 79). Ann Vane feels irritated at this complain of Supariwala and amazed that despite often facing such insults “the Supariwalas wanted to stay on” in Canada (*Darkness*, 79). Another Canadian of Indian origin named John Mohan Persawd comes to Ann Vane with “chipped teeth, cut lips, broken nose, blackened eyes” (*Darkness*, 82)—which he suffered in the hands of a racist group at Queen Street Station in Toronto. John Mohan bursts into anger against Canada’s attitude towards immigrants when complaining to Ann Vane. He says, “Canadians are mean as hell. . . Life is hopeless, man, no justice, no redress” (*Darkness*, 84). But most shockingly, Ann Vane, instead of assuring Mohan Persawd of any legal redress, seems to justify the racist attack on him. She says to Mohan Persawd, “If this had happened in New York, you’d have been left for dead” (*Darkness*, 84). But that New York is at least free from the kind of racial malice that always torments immigrants in Canada is well known to the Persawds. As Persawd’s lawyer relative sharply retorts to Ann Vane: “Correction, Miss Vane . . . If this had happened in New York, he’d have been mugged for his money, nor racially assaulted” (*Darkness*, 84). This is how utterly casually and without any sympathy or promise of legal redress Ann Vane looks at the problems of immigrants “only as a bureaucrat. Deal only with the sure things. Pass the others off. Get documentation. Promise nothing” (*Darkness*, 81). To Canadians, all these problems that South Asian immigrants faced there were isolated incidents, and Canadian Human Rights Office had nothing to do with them but simply keeping records of such cases.

Mukherjee severely criticizes Canada’s immigration policy in her famous *Darkness* story called “Tamurlane.” The story presents that both legal and illegal immigrants are treated by Canada almost the same way. Despite being a legal immigrant, Gupta, a *tandoor* chef in an Indian restaurant called Mumtaz Bar B. Q. in Toronto, has been crippled in a racist attack in a Toronto subway. His legs were so badly damaged in the attack that “he walked like a man on unbending but fragile stilts. His knees did not bend and when he sat, his legs fell straight out. When he washed in the kitchen, he cropped his stomach against the sink in order to keep his balance. Severe damage like that is difficult to watch, you want to pull away as from a beggar” (*Darkness*,

119). Despite all these cruelties and injustice, he has not left Toronto, rather has forgotten the pain for the hope that one day he will be able to make Canada his home. But all his dreams about Canada finish when the restaurant he works in is raided by immigration officers to shoo away illegal immigrants from there. Gupto loses patience in anger at the police raid, and at one point of confrontation between the South Asian employees in the restaurant and the immigration officials and mounties, Gupto attacks a mountie with a hatchet and is shot dead by him.

Perhaps the most scathing of the *Darkness* stories that Mukherjee wrote to critique Canada's immigration policy is "The World according to Hsu." In this story, Ratna, a Canadian journalist of mixed origins—she is half Czech and half Indian—and her Canadian husband Graeme Clayton, a professor of Psychology at McGill University, Montreal, are on a holiday tour in an island off the coast of Africa. While on the tour, they face violent demonstrations in the island, which force them to remain confined to their hotel room. Graeme Clayton has actually gone there to persuade Ratna to move from French dominant Montreal to English dominant Toronto where a university has offered him a chair in Personality Development. In the hotel room when he tells Ratna of his plan of moving to Toronto, she feels terrified at the thought of her experience of living in Toronto where immigrant citizens, particularly of South Asian origins, are more than often victims of racial hatred. She says, "In Toronto, she was not Canadian, not even Indian. She was something called, after the imported idiom of London, a paki. And for pakis, Toronto was hell" (*Darkness*, 41). The thought of returning to Toronto after the tour terrifies her heart as it reminds her of the racial hatred and insults she has experienced there because of her colour and the racist attacks immigrants of South Asian origins often face there. She remembers how "a week before their flight, a Bengali woman was beaten and nearly blinded on the street. And week before that an eight year old Punjabi boy was struck by a car announcing on its bumper: KEEP CANADA GREEN. PAINT A PAKHI" (*Darkness*, 47). Sensing Ratna's emotional upheaval when Graeme Clayton tells her that "It won't happen to you," and tries to convince her to believe that "Toronto's the safest city on the continent," she promptly retorts: "Sure," . . . "for you" (*Darkness*, 47). Another incident of racial hatred that an Indian woman faced haunts Ratna's mind. She recalls how "an Indian professor's wife was jumped at a red light, right in her car. They threw her groceries on the street. They said pakis shouldn't drive big cars" (47). Remembering all these experiences, she feels it is better for her to be in that politically unstable island where in the hotel she at least has an opportunity of enjoying the company of a "collection of Indians and Europeans babbling in English and remembered dialects" (*Darkness*, 56) than in Toronto where she would have to be subject to racist insults. Far away from Canada, she feels so lively in that foreign hotel that "she would never feel so at home again" (*Darkness*, 56). Ratna's inner desire to leave Canada corresponds to Mukherjee's, who finally unable to stand racial taunts left Canada for the USA.

Unlike Canada which discriminates between the mainstream population and the diaspora communities, as shown in *Darkness*, the USA regards it as “‘a permanently unfinished country’ because it has been continuously built and rebuilt by immigrants” (Ueda 5). Therefore, every person in the USA is a significant part of it, be s/he a black or a white, be s/he an Asian or an African, be s/he a Christian or a non-Christian. Mukherjee was aware of this all-inclusive, generous immigration policy of the United States since, before settling in Canada with her husband, she had been in the USA pursuing an MA at the University of Iowa. Perhaps from that time, she had been fascinated with American life. A proof in favour of such observation is found when we notice that her first two novels, *A Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975) are partly set in the USA and the heroines (protagonists) of the novels are mad to become Americans while the author of the novels was living in Canada. The reason why Mukherjee did not make her heroines of these two novels desire to settle in Canada may have been due to her inner desire to leave Canada and settle in the USA as she had found Canada's immigration policy hostile to immigrants. Fed up with Canada, Mukherjee along with her family moved to the United States in 1980. She found American immigration policy and culture more conducive to settlement than Canadian immigration policy because unlike Canada's policy of multiculturalism which technically never allowed immigrants to assimilate into the mainstream community, American melting pot policy allowed divergent races and cultures of immigrants to exist alongside the native culture. Therefore, America seemed to Mukherjee to be continually providing its immigrants with opportunities for what she called “romantic incarnation” whereas Canadian policy of multiculturalism continually drew its immigrants “a step backward to an old world, a hierarchical society” (1990 Interview, 11).

However, Mukherjee was not blind to racial problems existing in America, yet what made America a better option for her was the fact that, unlike in Canada, in the United States “there are human rights laws and ways to obtain legal redress in the courts” (1988 Interview, 652), and that is why she sharply said “America, with its melting pot theory of immigration has a healthier attitude towards Indian immigrants than Canada” (1988 Interview, 652). Because of this favourable immigration policy, by 1981, the year she published her essay “An Invisible Woman,” there was hardly a “town in America without its Indian family” (“Invisible Woman,” 39) whereas in the early sixties when she studied in the US “the Indian was an exotic figure in America, except in university towns and may be in New York” (“Invisible Woman,” 39).

In America, Mukherjee felt relieved of the pain of being labelled as “visible minority” (*Darkness*, 2) and felt exuberant finding that “there is a whole world of us now” (*Darkness*, 140). She could now be what she wanted to be. While in Canada, she only could write of the “aloofness of expatriation” (*Darkness*, 3) as the major theme of her writings, in America now she wrote of “the exuberance of immigration” (*Darkness*, 3). Mukherjee's coming from Canada to the United States was, thus,

decisively upbeat for her fiction as it also made a similar journey from the “aloofness of expatriation” to “the exuberance of immigration.” The *Darkness* stories she wrote after she had migrated to America are stories of how Indian immigrants were making efforts to be Americans in a comparatively friendly society free from the kind of malice and racism Indians usually faced in Canada. In the characters of these stories one does not trace any sign of mental weakness because here they were not a “visible minority,” but a necessary part of America. The titular character of the story “Angela,” a girl from Dhaka orphaned in the 1971 Independence War of Bangladesh and adopted by the Brandons in the USA, for example, has much confidence in her capacity. She courageously attempts to walk her path to self-fulfilment without anybody’s help. While in Canada, an immigrant girl like her even prostituted herself to make her living possible, in America Angela is privileged to retain her freedom and pursue her dream. Similarly, Leela Lahiri, the central character of “Hindus,” only within two years after coming to the US, finds “the [New York] city not as an island of dark immigrants but as a vast sea in which new Americans like myself could disappear and resurface at will” (*Darkness*, 136). She proudly declares herself as “an American citizen” (*Darkness*, 133). The heroine of “The Lady from Lucknow” Nafeesa Hafeez, married to a gentleman named Iqbal when she was only seventeen, challenges the conservative Islamic code of life by developing physical relationship with a 65 year old white American. She finds America as a suitable place for enjoying the kind of love that she has cherished all her life. In the story “A Father,” Mr. Bhowmick is a successful scientist in America, working as a metallurgist in Detroit. Although unhappiness sometimes creeps into Bhowmick’s heart, but his unhappiness is solely due to his failure to embrace American culture and an overriding intention to always cling to Indianness. Unlike him, his wife and daughter are complete Americans as they have learned to come up to American values and ways of life.

Despite America’s pro-immigration citizenship facilities, many people fail to make themselves Americans. Mukherjee finds the problem actually rooted in those immigrants’ clinging to their native cultures. They live in America, not with any mind to be part of the freeness of American culture, but with the conservativeness of their native culture: their principal aim is not to be American but to earn as much as they can and return home with their money later sometime. In Mukherjee’s short stories, the characters who have become Americans successfully are those like Angela and Leela Lahiri who, no doubt, carry their past with them, but do not let them be haunted or guided by their past and therefore their past is not a barrier on their way to getting completely plunged in the new culture. Thus while Leela Lahiri is an American heart and soul because of her staying aloof from cultivating expatriate mindset, H. R. H. Maharaja Patwant Singh in the same story has failed to be an American because of his maintaining expatriate mindset. In the same way, Mr. Bhowmick in “A Father” is happy as an Indian worker in America because of the



immigrants-friendly environment of the country, but he has not become a happy American because like an expatriate he stays in America to earn money with his mind always worshipping Indianness. In "Nostalgia" Mr. Patel, despite marrying a white American woman and having a white son and working at a state hospital in New York, has failed to embrace American culture completely. He has been in America for many years, but for his nostalgic love for Indianness, he seems to have remained more an expatriate. Mukherjee called such immigrants "lost souls, put upon and pathetic" (*Darkness*,1) and cautioned that immigrants cultivating expatriate mindset and having overriding love for native culture and intention to cling to it would fail to acculturate.

### Conclusion

To sum up, Mukherjee found that America, unlike Canada, did not discriminate between immigrants and natives. While Canada with its state-sponsored policy of multiculturalism forced immigrants to be locked into their selves, instead of allowing them to become Canadians, America offered opportunities to immigrants to be absorbed into and become an essential part of it. While Canada underestimated the talents of Indian immigrants and tended to neglect their contribution to Canadian life, America counted their talents and believed that the country was going ahead because of their arrivals. Mukherjee herself was a proof of her belief as her move from Canada to the United States led her career from relative literary anonymity and lack of recognition in Canada to award-winning success in the USA. Mukherjee also thought if any Indian immigrant faced any problem of acculturation in America, the problem was not due to American immigration policy flaw but due to his / her regressive tendencies.

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