

Negative Representation of the East: A Re-Orientalist gaze into Bharati Mukherjee's *Buried Lives*

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction revolves around the characters from those countries which were once colonized by the Western superpowers like United Kingdom, France, Italy and United States of America. Although, her main contribution is considered from South Asian identities, yet abundance of characters from Africa, Iran and other parts of the World can be observed in her fictions. Unlike other diasporic writers, Mukherjee's fiction addresses the hostile and nostalgic feelings of her characters towards one's own homeland and a kind of assimilation in the alien culture. Looking from this perspective, we can put forward the theory of Re-Orientalism by Lisa Lau and Christina Mendes where they have argued that in most diasporic writers' fiction, we can identify the feelings of describing Orient as the Westernized version. These writers, whether they live in East or West, have strong affiliations with what West had said about the Orient. Thus, applying Lau and Mendes's concept of Re-Orientalism, it has been examined "The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representation of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over (in part at least) by other Orientals, namely, the diasporic authors". Mukherjee's "Buried Lives" from her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1989) is analyzed from the perspective of Re-Orientalism where Mukherjee's description of Sri Lanka is matched up with the Westernized version of the East. This concept of Westernized version of the Orient was taken from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978).

Keywords:

Re-Orientalism, Westernisation, Diasporic attitude, South Asian Epoch.

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Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee's excellence lies in the fact that she depicted the immigrants' experience in North America; especially Canada and the USA. The growing criticism in Mukherjee's work is her experience of immigrants' lives away from their homeland. Her characters mainly belong to the region of South Asia and their identity is well constructed as diasporic one. Her work mainly deals with the problems of social, political, and cultural identities of the South Asian diaspora in Western countries like Canada and America. The problem of identity crisis faced by these diasporic

identities is not only the outcome of nostalgic experiences but it is a kind of plea, says Nalini Iyer (1996) "for immigrants to construct for themselves a narrative of home" (29).

Born in an Indian Bengali family (1940), Mukherjee migrated to America in search of a well-deserved future which she found in the form of the Iowa Workshop. She spent most of her time working and establishing her personality by constantly devoting herself to the process of creative writing. She was a writer by birth and she conceived that she would become a renowned American author. The most interesting part of her

life is that when she called herself an American author, not an Indian one. Iyers says “Mukherjee’s preoccupation with location and identity is evident in the “Introduction” to *Darkness* in which she names herself an American writer and argues that she is as American as any writer whose parents or grandparents came through Ellis Island” (30).

Mukherjee’s view of this scenario is quite antithetical as compared to other Indian diasporic writers. She said everything with a clear conscience and also died with a clear conscience. She was American and she died American. In her Novel *Jasmine* (1989), she quotes “I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet-proof vest, was to be a coward” (17). Although, she was a diaspora like all other diasporas in the Western countries, what makes her rebellious is her remark that she is not an Indian but a respectable American citizen.

The writing career of Mukherjee started from her early days when she went abroad with her parents. She belonged to a well-to-do family which places her excellence and contribution above all other female writers of her age. She has produced a wonderful trilogy of *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1975), *Wife* (1975), and *Jasmine* (1989). Besides, she has also produced two collections of short stories; *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and *Darkness* (1985). She had also written few pieces of non-fiction, but they did not get a popular view from the public.

The author of this article intends to provide an interesting study of “Buried Lives” by Bharati Mukherjee by applying the theoretical lens of Ana Cristina Mendes and Lisa Lau. The researcher will analyze “Buried Lives” by using Mendes and Lau’s concept of re-orientalism. While talking about Lisa Lau and Graham Huggan, RohmaSaleem (2017) states that “they have contested against the aggressive promotion of many Oriental writers by Occidental marketing Pundits. Both of them think that the works that gain recognition in the international market and which have a high scope of winning prizes of

international acclaim are invariably those which appease the Western thirst for the mysterious and elusive East” (139). Mukherjee’s work represents the same attitude towards the representation of the East. The Western idea that the East is backward, exotic, and barbaric can also be identified in the work of Mukherjee. Her short story, “Buried Lives” gives a description of Sri Lanka (East) which is backward, exotic, and barbaric in the sense that leaving it for any Western country would be the best option.

Research Objectives

- The indifference showed by Mukherjee towards the East
- The validation of my argument by applying Re-Orientalist thought
- The ultimate success that Mukherjee has achieved in the Western world

Research Questions

- In what ways Mukherjee’s depiction of the East is significant to the expectations of the West?
- How does Mukherjee make use of the re-oriental thought in her short story “Buried Lives”?

Problem Statement

The researcher believes that Mukherjee’s work contains the elements of hatred towards the colonized countries. Her work is filled with such feelings of hatred towards one’s nation and love for migration to Western countries. Thus, the researcher firmly believes that conducting a re-oriental study would throw some light on her representation of the East as a backward, bashful, and timid entity.

Significance of the Study

Research studies are always significant because it provides legitimate referential sources to the intended subjects. For instance, Bharati Mukherjee seems to be a follower of the early Creek Stoics philosophers who had empowered the field of cosmopolitanism. The idea of cosmopolitanism is that individuals are free to decide where they belong to and their responsibility lies outside the borders of their respective countries. Mukherjee’s work depicts the same attitude and one can see clearly that her characters are more concerned with the process of

migration. Although, she follows Stoics philosophers and allows migration as a basic human right, at the time depicts East as negative and 'The Other'. Further, the researcher believes that he is making a vital contribution in the already existed study on Mukherjee's work. He believes that it would help other researchers in the formulation of a theoretical lens.

Literature Review

The works of Bharati Mukherjee do not lack the call for appreciation. She has been too much explored by the research scholars. Her works mainly revolve around the themes of identity crisis faced by the South Asian diaspora in the Western world. It sometimes involves the issues of communication, family, and home across the borders. "The Middleman and Other Short Stories" is a very famous short collection by Bharati Mukherjee who caught much critical attention. Few short stories developed further into novels and thus received much literary attention from critics and research scholars. Here is a list of works that have been explored by different research scholars.

C. Neelima (2014) provides a detailed study of diasporic nostalgia in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee. The paper investigates the principal theoretical framework encompassing diaspora and the ideas of home, having a place, and nostalgia. It is to extrapolate from the theoretical system and apply their importance and restrictions to the investigation of the diasporic condition. The author of the article says that the essential spotlight will be on the Indian diaspora inside the United States and its depiction in Bharati Mukherjee's short fiction. She is of the view that the more interesting part of her essay is the investigation of the dual strategic use of nostalgia "both employed as a method and represented as a theme" (33). This method of using nostalgia both as a method and theme is subjugated to how Mukherjee creates and shapes the sensitive issues of home and belonging.

The author of the article has delimited her study to the short story collection of Bharati Mukherjee, "The Middleman and Other Short Stories". She

seems to believe that nostalgia in Mukherjee's work performs dual roles. The first important role in which nostalgia functions is that of a critique of the past and the other is having a great passion to join the modern and liberal Western society. This yearning for Westernized culture often takes Mukherjee's characters to abuse their own native country. Further, she adds that the whole process of migration from the native country to the foreign one is a kind of process which helps Mukherjee's characters to explore and attain "self-invention and transformation" (34).

After the modern industrial age, the concept of alienation becomes a vital part of our daily social and political life. The concept of alienation means that individuals are isolated both in society and at home. A person even also feels alienated when he is confronted with a new culture. Dr. G. Nirmala (2018) provides a striking study of Mukherjee's fiction from the theoretical lens of alienation, isolation, immigration, and the concept of an identity crisis. She says that Mukherjee's characters are immigrants and they are living their life in extreme exile; far away from their homeland. Thus, it gives a complete image, a portrayal of her characters living in exile and experiencing life in extreme isolation.

She describes Mukherjee as an expatriate writer who does not feel at home both in the adopted country as well as in her native country. It can be said in a way that Mukherjee's characters might feel the same tendency but applying this very attitude for Mukherjee is nonsensical. This might be true for other expatriates that they live a life of exile, isolation, and identity crisis when experiencing life in a foreign or alien country. Further, she adds that these people undergo a constant change in the whole process of assimilation and a new kind of hybrid or fluid identity is formed.

While talking about Mukherjee's "The Middleman and Other Short Stories", Nirmala labels Mukherjee as a middleman who is trying her best to fill the gap between East and West, more specifically between the native country of

her characters and the new one adopted. Thus, she is playing a role of compensation between the two different extremes. While talking about the foreign culture and its influences on the expatriate characters, Nirmala adds that “Foreign culture does not impede a person’s coming to terms with oneself. At best, it works as a catalyst” (216). Indeed it is very true of Mukherjee’s own experience in the Western countries. She adopted the same strategy of assimilating her personality in the foreign and alien culture of the West.

María Luz González Rodríguez and Juan Ignacio Oliva Cruz’s (2015), paper attempts to discover the individual position of Bharati Mukherjee as a “woman writer by using the female characters caught between two different worlds, homes and cultures present in her work” (72). The authors of the article firmly believe that Mukherjee’s experience as an Indian diaspora in the Western countries has been transformed into a life of her characters in the stories and novels. Rodríguez and Cruz’s main focus is upon the portrayal of female characters who are shattered between two different versions of extreme, “homes and cultures”, the social and political exile they experience, and the process of abiding continuous struggle to live, and the performance of assimilating into an alien culture. Further, Mukherjee’s own experience as a Canadian expatriate is discussed with close reference to her female characters in her fiction work.

Mukherjee’s struggle to construct and then deconstruct the alien culture, her ambition to have a glance at new culture from a new perspective, and her struggle of narrating the story of her transformation is the vital sources that can be identified in the female characters of her fiction work. Further, the authors claim that Mukherjee’s description of American culture is of acceptance. She compares and contrasts the lives of individuals between two different countries; native and foreign. The former gives no inspiration, motivation, and passion for change, growth, and development, and the latter promises great happiness, acceptability, and a promising

future. Her stand on American as a country where everyone can fulfill her dreams is the outcome of the early 1960s when America was on the edge of development, progress, and advancement. Thus, her characters explore themselves in the mid of 1960s America where the process of assimilation is far easier when compared to the world after 9/11.

T. Ramesh Babu and Dr. P. Satyanarayana (2015) explore the journey of Bharati Mukherjee to Canada and America. This study mainly focuses upon the assimilation of Mukherjee to an alien culture and her acceptance of the ways of life American people which constitutes language, culture, and social norms. Nalini Iyer (1996) studies “The Holder of the Word” “self-conscious scrutiny of location and narrative in The Holder of the World” (32). Dr. G. Nirmala Siva (2018) takes charge of Mukherjee’s “Darkness” and “The Middleman and Other Short Stories”. Although she believes that every diasporic writer uses personal nouns, pronouns and idioms while tickling his created characters. She believes that Mukherjee’s use of correct American English is purely an outcome of her association with American culture, politics and language. Dr. G. Nirmala Siva (2019) also studies Mukherjee’s stories from her volume of the collection “The Middleman and Other Short Stories” from the perspective of social struggle that characters do in the stories of Mukherjee.

Ambika Sharma and Dr. Tanu Gupta (2014) maintain a comparative study of Mukherjee’s two short stories from her “Darkness” and “The Middleman and Other Short Stories”. They add that “The objective of this paper is to undertake diasporic perspective including the post-colonial approach to achieve the objective” (1). Sonya Domergue (1997) studies Mukherjee’s “The Management of Grief”, taken from her second collection of short stories, from the perspective of woman experiences in the foreign country. The story tells us about the experiences of Shaila Bhawe and Kusum after the gruesome deaths in their family.

Research Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The researcher aims to analyze the text of the short story through qualitative research design. Gary D. Shank (2006) defines qualitative research design as “a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning” (5). The systematic process into inquiry means that it should be properly “planned, ordered” and well-established. By empirical, Shank intends to say that something which is an outcome of the experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) also define qualitative research design in a way that reflects a fact that qualitative research design often demands a natural setting to get things done. According to them, qualitative research design “means that qualitative researcher study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (3). Thus, coming to know about the basics of research design, the researcher would utilize this design to analyze the text of “Buried Lives” by Bharati Mukherjee.

Research Method

The research aims to use the method of textual analysis. In textual analysis, according to Catherine Besley (2005), research is supposed to search and resolve the problem. She adds that textual analysis works in the medium of psychology. A researcher (a psychoanalyst) recognizes the issue and proceeds to the second step of finding a solution for its resolution. The research intends to analyze the text by using Besley’s method of textual analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Edward W. Said used the word “Orientalism” in his book “Orientalism”. His book was published in 1978. Although, the credit of invention goes to Said, yet the concept was present in English Literary studies. When colonialism comes to end, a new field of study becomes apparent on the surface of literary studies. This new field of study is called postcolonial criticism and Said’s “Orientalism” is regarded as one of the best contributions to postcolonial studies. His book

“Orientalism” covers different subjects regarding postcolonial studies.

Later, Lisa Lau and Christina Mendes develop the concept of re-orientalism. RohmaSaleem (2017) says that the process of appeasing Western writers by giving a dark, gloomy and gruesome description of the East is called reorientalism (139). Lisa Lau and Anna Cristina Mendes, in their joint struggle “Re-Orientalism and South Asian Identity Politics: The Oriental Other within” (2011) saw various stereotypical attitudes, in re-Orientalist works, “a reductionist representation at the expense of holistic ones, and a deliberate process of self- othering” (13). While describing the concept Re-Orientalism they add, “Re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalized East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether (3).”

In her recent article “Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Orientals”, Lisa Lau (2007) addresses the problem of presentation of the orient by orientals. In the past, the orient has been picturized by orientals; belonging to the West. Said uses the term occident for those Western writers who paint the image of the East more superficially. According to Lau, it is an essential kind of projection of Said’s idea of “Orientalism”. Thus, Re-Orientalism becomes a parallel process that brings the orient writers to the front. She adds “The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representation of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over (in part at least) by other Orientals, namely, the diasporic authors” (571). Lau explains that the term Orientalism does not draw on the representation of orient by occident writers but it has attained certain problematic definition where orient is describing orient according to the taste of occident pundits.

Lau distinguishes between two types of Orientals; inside and outside. The problem is with the second one, indeed with the diasporic community and the question is whether to consider them Orientals or not. According to Lau, those who are living abroad and writing about Orient are Orientals. They are outside, yet they owe fragments of their identity to the Orient. They are Orientals. While describing the outsiders, Lau adds “They are not completely alien to the Orient, but derive both ancestry and identity from the Orient (and indeed many have very immediate and strong links to the Orient)” (572). Although, some of these South Asian Diasporas owe their identity to alien culture as well, yet they cannot separate themselves from the mother culture.

Hasan Boynukara and Cengiz Karagöz (2019) describe the distinction between Said’s Orientalism and Lau’s Re-Orientalism. The latter is defined not again as the former but rather continuation of Orientalism. While talking about Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Namesake*, they add “If Orientalism discussed by Edward Said means that there are negative stereotypical images in the Oriental nations and sharply determined lines between the West and the Orient, Re-Orientalism points to the perception that the diasporic South Asian writers seek to reflect backward, patriarchal and negative stereotypes about the South Asian culture and conventions in their literary texts” (144). As far as the fiction work of Bharati Mukherjee is concerned, it is also labeled against such backward, unidentified and gruesome description of the East. We would look at how far Lau’s Re-Orientalism is applicable when it comes to Mukherjee’s “Buried Lives”, a short story taken from “The Middleman and Other Stories”.

Analysis and Discussions

The story opens where we find characters struggling against the unrest caused by the Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009). In the very first sentence, the readers come to know that Sri Lanka is facing great social, political, and economical problems. Mukherjee writes;

“ONE March midafternoon in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, Mr. N. K. S. Venkatesan, a forty-nine-

year-old schoolteacher who should have been inside a St. Joseph’s Collegiate classroom explicating Arnold’s “The Buried Life” found himself instead at a barricaded intersection, ax in hand and shouting rude slogans at a truckload of soldiers” (192). Here, we see that the protagonist of the story, Mr. Venkatesan is facing issues from these Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. He has been alarmed by the condition of his family and also about his sister who is running with a man from Liberation Tigers Army. Being a school teacher, Mr. Venkatesan finds himself in great turmoil because the socio-political conditions of Sri Lanka do not give him much space where he can openly express his feelings for achieving a greater future. Thus, we can elaborate on the fact that “Buried Life” depicts the life of a South Asian Sri Lankan writer and his struggle to escape Sri Lanka into a well-established Western country. Mr. Venkatesan loses his belief in Sri Lanka because he does not see a future in it. While talking to men from Liberation Army he says “Don’t think you chaps invented civil disobedience!” (193). He knows that this ‘civil disobedience’ will cause certain situations in modern Sri Lanka where for a person like him, there would be no opportunities at all. When his sister claims her right to go with the man from Army, Mukherjee depicts Mr. Venkatesan’s wish for going on a foreign scholarship. She writes “What if he were to do what he wanted! Twenty years ago when he’d had the chance, he should have applied for a Commonwealth Scholarship” (194).

Thus, from the very start of the story, we came to know about the description of Ceylon, present-day Sri Lanka, If we quote Lau and Mendes (2011), they say;

“Re-Orientalism is based on how cultural producers with eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether” (3). Here, in the story, we came to know that the description of Sri Lanka was more

valid as it came to the perception of the West, as it was presented by Said in his milestone work 'Orientalism'. Mr. Vankatesan's dissatisfaction with Sri Lanka leads him to say that it is no place of living and he decided to encounter another alien culture in the future. Secondly, his responsibilities were kind of a hurdle between his achievements and his future life that he might have spent in the West. Mr. Venkatesan always thought about studying in Oxford, applying for a commonwealth scholarship, and get married to an English girl as well as loitered abroad. But eventually, this couldn't happen because he had to take the responsibility for his sisters after his parent's death.

The Westernized version of the East always carries elements of barbarism and backwardness. Here, in the story, we saw a member of the Tiger Army saying;

"Blood for blood," he shouted, timidly at first. "Blood begets blood" (195). It signified the horrific, gruesome and gloomy situation of Sri Lanka at that time. Sri Lanka was uneducated, barbaric and backward and no such state of living promises its people a well-deserved future. Mukherjee provides another powerful description of the civil war in Sri Lanka. She adds;

"It should never have happened. The axe looped clumsily over the heads of demonstrators and policemen and fell, like a captured kite, into the hands of a Home Guards over. There was blood, thick and purplish, spreading in jagged stains on the man's white uniform. The crowd wheeled violently. The drivers of paddy wagons laid panicky fingers on their horns. Veils of tear gas blinded enemies and friends" (197). Such was the condition of Sri Lanka that fairly becomes what the Western powers had described and in what ways they had promised these people by eradicating all these social evils from less-educated, more-barbaric, and revengeful society.

Mr. Vankatesan's love for English literature is unique. The writer described him as a lover of Mathew Arnold. Mr. Vankatesan was a school teacher. He was supposed to teach English in

school. He wanted to include Arnold poems in the course. He asked about four of Arnold poems that carry rhyme and music. Mukherjee describes the scene in the following words;

"Matthew Arnold was Venkatesan's favorite poet. Mr. Venkatesan had talked the Head into including four Arnold poems. The verses picked by the Head hadn't been "dulcet" at all, and one hundred and three pages of the total of one hundred and seventy-four had been given over to upstart Trinco versiers' martial ballads" (198). His love for Western Literature would lead him to visit West in the coming events. He was not happy at all because the whole syllabus was taken from Trinco versiers where Mr. Vankatesan wanted the other way around, by including "dulcet" version of Mathew Arnold poetry.

Mr. Venkatesan's harsh behavior with his students was solely based on the fact that he was feeling miserable in that state of consciousness where he could not fulfill what he deserves. In such a state of mind, as Mukherjee put forward, Mr. Venkatesan "blamed the times. He blamed Sri Lanka" (201). While writing letters for admission to American universities, Mr. Venkatesan implied a very careful manner. He started all of his letters from the initials words like "Dear Respected Sir" and ended with "Humbly but eagerly awaiting your response" (202). His plea for visiting Western culture and remaining part of such superior people and attaining what he could not in the soil of Sri Lanka became clear from his letter to one of the American universities. He wrote ;

"He tried to put down in the allotted blanks what it felt like to be born so heartbreakingly far from New York or London. On this small dead-end island, I feel I am a shadow-man, a nothing. I feel I'm a stranger in my room. What consoles me is reading. I sink my teeth into fiction by great Englishmen such as G. A. Henty and A. E. W. Mason. I live my life through their imagined lives. And when I put their works down at dawn I ask myself Hath not a Tamil eyes, heart, ears, nose, throat, to adapt the words of the greatest Briton. Yes, I am a Tamil. If you prick me, do I not

bleed? If you tickle me, do I not laugh? Then, if I dream, will you not give me a chance, respected Sir, as only you can?" (202). This is how Mr. Venkatesan felt about his own country. For him, Sri Lanka represented "small dead-end island" where there is no promise of a secure future, where only people feel thirsty for one another's blood. For him, the poetry of Mathew Arnold and the corpus of large English literature is a feeling of consolation. He felt dizzy when smells the poetic genius of poets like G. A. Henry and A. E. W. Mason. He lived his whole life by imagining the great writers of West and he waited to have visited those places where these had lived their life. Such was Mr. Venkatesan's love for Western Literature and the foreign alien culture where he could have used an approach, even if it could have taken his life too. Although he reached Germany and found a girl as well we could not speculate his future. All we know about Mr. Venkatesan is that he has successfully left Sri Lanka whom he could not bear anymore.

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee's "Buried Lives" from her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) represents the image of the Orient that fits according to the description of the East by West. Lau's proclamation that "The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representation of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over (in part at least) by other Orientals, namely, the diasporic authors" is very rightly adapted when it comes the writers like Mohammad Hanif, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Bharati Mukherjee. In her story, she not only named the region Ceylon (Sri Lanka) but also identifies his socio-political conditions with real-life characters like the school teacher Mr. Ventatesan and his dream of leaving Ceylon for some other Western country. The social, political, and economic condition of present Sri Lanka had been portrayed in a way that had fettered human growth both on the mental and psychological

level. Mr. Venkatesan's journey from Sri Lanka to Germany had been written in a way that portrayed characters in some sort of trauma- coming from the civil war between Tamil Tiger Army and Sri Lankan government. In short, we can argue that Mukherjee's representation of Sri Lanka fits what the West had labeled against the East.

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