

The Use of English Language in the Short Stories of Bharati Mukherjee, “Darkness”, “The Middleman and Other Stories”

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Abstract

Language plays an important role in the short stories. Different writers have adapted different means to express their ideas in their stories in English. All languages flourish in a particular environment. If any language has to flourish in a foreign land it needs alterations so as to come to terms with the cultural differences of the land. The non-native speakers face so many problems in depicting their thoughts and themes in a non-native language. Particularly when the Indian creative artist has to depict his theme and ethos in English he has to mould and alter the language to suit it to the Indian characters and situations. He cannot totally write like British writers, because the traditional and situational differences come in

his way. So the Indian creative writers have invented their own idiom and usage of English language to suit their creative needs.

Bharati Mukherjee uses English language to suit her American and Canadian settings and situations and to suit her characters. Her primary education in missionary schools also has helped her in this regard. In her two volumes of stories she uses pure American English.

Keywords

Education in Missionary schools, American English, Expressions, American Slangs, Jargons and French and German words.

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee used American English to suit her American and Canadian protagonists in the American and Canadian settings with little modifications. The Blessed Mary School in which she studied was more like a British school. At the school in Calcutta the students had to learn Christian scriptures. Most of the students in that elite school were from rich Hindu families. It was a very prestigious school in those days. When a question was asked about her decision to write in English language she fondly remembers. (in an interview with Tirthankar Chanda that,)

I was sent to Loretto House which was a convent school and where we were taught to use English as a

first language. In place of Bengali they made us do alternative English. It was in independent India that English became gradually – even more than when I was a child and went to school in England for a few years – the easy, automatic language of expression.¹

She never felt any difficulty in using English language even from her childhood days. So the education in Christian schools gave her a good grounding in English language and literature. At school a man was employed to check the pronunciation of English language with sing-song accent. This helped her in reading novels and books by famous French and English authors. In an interview with Resell Schoch she says about her accent of English as,

It was very important to the west that we weren't speaking?"Indian English with a sing-song accent. It's only lately that I've come to realize that this colonial underpinning of my education wasn't simply to make us acceptable if we had to give speeches as the wives of Indian dignitaries in European capitals. In a way; it was instilling in us, 'This is the right way to speak yours is the wrong' and therefore coming to the United States has been very empowering for me. Here I'm not locked into thinking in terms of correct/ incorrect.' here I can improvise grammar, accent, and language and still feel self-wrote.²

From her childhood she has been obsessed with the idea to become a writer and naturally as she was educated in the best convent school in Calcutta she picked up English as her medium of expression.

Having had a Master's degree in English and having planned to become a writer since her childhood she has naturally selected English as the medium of expression. Her stay in Iowa during the prestigious "Writers Work Shop" also helped her to develop and perfect her language skills. As she confesses in an interview with Lane,

The recent burgeoning of Anglophone literature by writers of Indian origin, whether they live in India or live outside, is because we were given English as our stepmother tongue. When I am writing fiction I think and imagine only in English. Especially after India became Independents Indians ever remaining in India became more and more confident about the use of English language and 'Indianized it; they claimed it and changed it, without feeling they were doing a peter sellers number.... Whether we like it or not the language of power, particularly in publishing, is, at the moment, English...³

But she has no such problems in her stories as all her stories are set in America and Canada. She hasn't struggled to depict the Canadian or American settings and situations in her stories as her use of language suited them. In her two volumes of short stories she uses two different types of English. In her first novel she is more British in her use of language than American but later when she has written the two volumes of short stories, she becomes more of American than British. As all the themes and situations are set in America and Canada she

uses American vocabulary in almost all her stories. In the story "A Father" she describes the beginning of the day in America as,

On Wednesday morning in mid-May. Mr. Bhowmick woke up as he usually did at 5:43 a.m. checked his Rolex against the alarm clock's digital readout, punched down the alarm (see for 5:45), then nudged his wife awake. She worked as a claims investigator for an insurance company that had an office in a nearby shopping mall. She didn't really have to leave the house until 8:30, but she liked to get up early and cook him a big breakfast..... (D.p.59)4

She is well aware of the daily routine of the South Asians in America. Though they live in America they never forget the daily routine of their life in India, they continue to do the same in America, but with a slight difference. She also feels free in her use of words like 'shopping mall', 'Eggs-cellent Recipes', and expressions like 'He definitely didn't want to blurt out anything about the sick-in-the-guts sensations that came over him most mornings.' In the story "Isolated Incidents" she also uses expressions like 'you can take the girl out of Canada' and 'She was nearly the girl in the jacket of cream in your jeans', 'you've gotta come out and visit', etc. Though the Indian readers cannot understand the meaning of these expressions she never tries to give any explanation, because they suit the description of the situations.

Even in The Middleman and other stories she uses American English to describe the situations and the

settings of America. She uses suitable vocabulary to describe gang activities in America. In the story "Loose Ends" the protagonist, Jeb works as a shooter to Mr. Doc Healy. Through the words of Jeb, Mukherjee describes the gang activities and the conditions that prevail in America:

Hey, what we have sounds like the Constitution of the United States. We have freedom and no strings attached. We have no debts. We come and go as we like..... You can smell the fecund rot of the jungle in every headline. You can park your car in the shipping mall and watch the dope change hands, the Goldilockses and Peter Pans go off with new daddies, the dish-washers and short-order cooks haggle over fake passports...IF you want to stay alive,' Doc Healy cautioned me the first day, 'just keep consuming and moving like a locust. Do that, Jeb, m'boy, and you'll survive to die a natural death. (T.M.p.45)5

The characters also speak English fluently as they are all well educated and skilled and the Americans with whom the characters interact are also primarily middle class whites, people who fit the old, white Anglo-Saxon ideal of Americanism. So Mukherjee never finds it difficult to use English either British or American. Even in the case of the protagonists from lower middle class, gangsters, shooters and underworld people she uses language quite fit to the characters into their situations as in the first story, "The Middleman" where the protagonist is a macho operator in the rough and tumbled world, and Mukherjee uses American English suitable to the characters.

Christ, Al, here I've got this setup and I gotta beg her for it"

"Wanna come fishing? Won't cost you extra, Al."

"Sweetie, I asked you who gave you that filthy crow. (T.M.p.5)6

She uses the colloquial expressions like 'gotta', 'wanna', 'Sweetie', 'Gringo', etc, to suit the characters. In another story, "Loose Ends" also she uses the language suitable to the characters as, "I suck in my windbreaker before letting me in, and "You're blonder than you were. Blond's definitely your colour... Hey,' I yell I need a room for the night. Don't any of you dummies speak American?"(T.M.p.53)7

She never hesitates to use wrong expressions and wrong words, particularly while depicting the Indian characters. In the story "The Tenant" Mr. Chatterjee speaks typical Indian English

Mrs. Chatterjee has made some Indian snacks. She is waiting to meet you because she is knowing your cousin-sister who studied in Scottish Church College. My home is okay, no? (T.M.p.103)8

Though words like 'cousin-sister', 'is knowing', 'is okay no', expressions incorrect, they are ignored as the protagonists who speak them are Indians. She also uses some Indian expressions like 'bapre bap', 'Hullo, hullo, hullo', 'many mens', etc, to lend an Indian colour.

As all the characters of her stories are from urban and semi urban settings and well educated middle class people she never uses abusive words except in some situations where she depicts underworld activities in stories like "The Middleman", "Loose Ends" and "Isolated Incidents." Words like 'shit', 'whale shit', 'python curds', 'beagle', 'filthy crow', etc are used. She even uses jargons in some of her stories to suit the characters as in the story "Angela", where she says 'To irradiate the room with positive thinking.', 'Sometimes I visualize Grace as a black tropical bat, cutting through disk on blunt, ugly wings,' words like 'Gringo', 'Prego', etc. She also uses some slang words to suit the situations, like 'its awesome', and clichés like 'love flees but we're stuck with Love's debris' which illustrate her linguistic level as an expatriate writer.

As she has picked up some French and German when she was in the European countries along with her parents, she uses the French and German expressions in most of her American stories. In stories like, "The World According to Hsu", "The Middleman", "Loose Ends". She confesses in one of the interviews.

At the age of eight, I went with the rest of the family to Europe. We stayed abroad for three years, which meant that I had to go to school and live in cities like London, Liverpool, Basel and Montreux. That's how I first learned English and picked up some Swiss, German and French.⁹

About the non-availability of a formal language to write American fiction she says,

In the early eighties, when I started making fiction out of the urgency and the confusion I felt as a brown immigrant in black/white/red America, I suddenly realized that I had no models in the contemporary American stories and novels that I read for pleasure.... I did not have ready made community of reader who understood the motivations and the reasoning my characters were going through, how they struggled, secondly by second with language to express their feelings to English speaking America. I had to invent my own models. That was both scary and exhilarating.¹⁰

About the drastic change her language has undergone after her earlier works, she says,

When I thumb through pages of my novels in chronological order, I am stunned by the changes. Like Jasmine, like Debby, I have gone through several incarnations. For instance, my first novel, "The Tiger's Daughter", could only have been written by an Indian Expatriate writer, still coming to terms with the homeland that she had left behind. The vocabulary, the wit and the sentences construction play on, or parody, the British English literarian that I was taught to admire unquestioningly by the Irish nuns in my Calcutta school.¹¹

Though she likes poetry very much she never uses any poetic reference in her stories. She likes Keats very much. In an interview with Tina Chen and S.X. Goudie she confesses that,

I loved to read poetry out loud. Tagore and Keats, oh, they were so heady when I was a school girl in Calcutta. I responded to the euphony first; then to the ideas. I didn't know any Buddhists and came from a staunch Hindu family, but Tagore made me weep over the persecution of Buddhist converts in ancient India. Same with Keats; I'd never been to Greece, not even seen pictures of the country, but I sure could visualize the friezes capes in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." There was something fresh about Keats because he was rebelling against the narrowness of British conventions. Though India was a sovereign nation when I first encountered Keats, my convent-school campus remained a very 'English' spot, you know, we had to sing Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas, that sort of thing, and we were expected to admire the logic and orderliness of the British mind. Keats was resisting those values in his poems. I suppose loving Keats's poems for me was a quiet form of guerrilla warfare against my teachers¹²

So though she liked Keats and Tagore as a child, and though this liking continued throughout her life, there are no poetic references in her short stories.

Conclusion

On the whole she has done so much work in English language, as the medium of expression. In immigrant literature it is very difficult to incorporate the multicultural mosaic in the native language of a writer, because it needs a language which integrates the old cultural vocabulary

with the new one. So language becomes a metaphor of both belonging and of not belonging. As all her themes and settings are from America and Canada she does not face any problem in depicting them in English language. Her long stay in U.S and Canada also enables her to depict the social scenes and settings of America in her stories. She also feels free in using the American expression. Though the Indian readers cannot understand the meaning of some of the American expressions, she never gives any explanations. The characters also speak English fluently as they all are well educated, and the Americans with whom the characters interact are also primarily middle class whites, people who fit the Id, white Anglo-Saxon ideal Americanness. So she never finds it difficult to use English language either British or American. While depicting the character like gangsters, shooters and underworld people she uses the language quiet fit to their situations. She also uses some German and French expressions in her stories as she had picked them up while she was in those countries as a child. Though she likes the poetry of Keats and Tgore she never uses any poetic references in her stories.

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