

## **A study of Bharathi Mukherjee's short stories "A Father", "Saints", "Angella", and "The Lady from Lucknow".**

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**Abstract:** *A comparative literature transcends national and cultural boundaries, offers a global view of world literature. In a comparative literature, religions probe vital issues everywhere as innumerable religions are followed all over the world reflect in various literatures. The present paper is focused on a short story titled "A Father", extracted from Bharathi Mukherjee's short story collection, Darkness. "A Father", deals with a tricky situation in which the cultural and ethnic encounter is not between individuals but attitudes acquired as well as preserved between reason and superstition. The inadequacy of the expatriate, the father's conflict between the Indian Hindu religion, and the American way of life brings his inability to cope with immigrant living, are brought out in this story. The final eruption of violence in Mr. Bhowmick, reveals when he turns himself as an Indian goddess Kali, leads to attack his daughter, in a rolling pin, and is due to his inability to reconcile the wistful expatriate in himself with the immigrant, in his militantly feminist daughter.*

**Key words:** *culture, ethnic, religion, superstition, violence,*

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### **I. Introduction**

A comparative literature transcends national and cultural boundaries, offers a global view of world literature. In a comparative literature, religions probe vital issues everywhere as innumerable religions are followed all over the world reflect in various literatures. Religion is considered as a set of institutions, or ideas and beliefs or lived practice, all of which have complex relations with each other, and all of which are affected by and in turn affect literature. The question here is how religion and literature are interrelated to one another.

The present paper focuses on short stories titled "A Father", "Saints", "Angella", "The Lady from Lucknow," extracted from Bharathi Mukherjee's short story collection, Darkness. She is best known writer of short stories to emerge from the Indian Diaspora. The power of her writing is due in small measure to the sense of the living experience of events grounded in autobiography, which provides in her writing. Mukherjee experienced both negative hatred and positive welcome in the countries of immigration. Here, in the present paper deals with how, Characters belong to religions like Hindu, Christianity, and Islam are culturally encountered their problems in different ways.

Hinduism is an ancient religion with well established traditions that cut deeply into Indian daily life. Hindu civilization had a long history, on its own, with well-developed scriptures and traditions. Hinduism is a religion of the subcontinent of India, with 80.5% of the population identifying themselves as Hindus. The Vedic Culture originated in India between 2000 and 1500 B.C. As a consequence, Hinduism, considered to be the successor of Vedic religion, has had a profound impact on India's History, culture and philosophy.

In Hinduism, Kali is considered a goddess of Time, Change, and Destruction. Kali goddess is also associated with empowerment, Shakthi. The name Kali means black, time, death, the consort of lord of death, Shiva. Since Shiva is called the eternal time, Kali, his consort also means 'Time' or 'Death'. Hence, Kali is the goddess of Time and Change. Although sometimes presented as dark and violent, her earliest incarnation as a figure of annihilation of evil forces still has some influence.

In "A Father", the Bhowmick's family, originally from Bihar, Hindu family in India, having settled in Detroit in North America, go through the upheavals of adapting to the American way of life. Mr. Bhowmick holds on to a metallic image of the Indian Hindu goddess "Kali", the patron goddess of his family as well as the goddess of wrath and vengeance. He noticed once that the tongue of the goddess hanging out suddenly seemed as red and saucy. In Detroit, Mr. Bowmick is a character of thinking as bad luck for his neighbour's sneeze at the start of his work one morning, he feels that the goddess's scarlet little tongue tip wagging at him, arouse fear in his mind. First, he is overcome with guilt at his failure to love his 26-year old daughter Babli, he has the impression that the goddess was actually sticking out her tongue at him. In his muddled imagination, which his Americanized wife dismisses as paranoia, but the change in the appearance of the Goddess determines the change in the fate of his family. On learning that the unmarried Babli is pregnant, he begins to pray to Kali\_Mata at nights. As Bhowmick comes to know that Babli's pregnancy is through artificial insemination, her

shocked father perceives in her a living incarnation of the goddess Kali herself, especially when she screams at him and sees her tongue looks as thick and red, squirming behind her row of perfect teeth.

The reference to Kali underlines the otherness of the Bhowmick family in their Detroit setting, while also revealing the potential of familiar family members to change into frightening others. The reversal of roles between Mr. Bhowmick, and his wife during the scene of confrontation with Babli, as Mrs. Bhowmick, the progressive, driving force in the couple throughout, seems to go to pieces at the horror of the idea of a syringe replacing a human father, does not last long. Mr. Bhowmick, who had been trying to separate his wife and daughter as they fought, ends up attacking Babli with the rolling pin himself, and it is once again his dynamic wife who stops the violence by calling police. "A Father" can be read then as a theme of religious and cultural shock, which is revealed through the character of Mr. Bhowmick who gets shocked by the pregnancy of his daughter through artificial insemination and she is not having the tendency to marry a man. This is totally against the married life of Indian culture which he still likes to follow in Detroit.

"A Father", also deals with a tricky situation in which the cultural and ethnic encounter is not between individuals, but attitudes acquired as well as preserved between reason and superstition. Mr. Bhowmick is predominantly an expatriate though his wife and daughter are well-adjusted immigrants. He is nostalgic about the feminine and tender women of his youth. He is disappointed that his daughter Babli, an electrical engineer, is no feminine enough for him. When he discovers his daughter's pregnancy, though traditional thoughts of family honour raise their head, he is happy that someone had found her feminine and lovable. He is shocked when he hears that she is pregnant through artificial insemination and not having the tendency to marry a man, out of a hatred for men. Caught between Mr. Bhowmick's passionate obsession with his Indianness and the onslaught of the New World that he finds reflected in his daughter Babli, a student of technology, he is unable to lead a steady normal life. The inadequacy of the expatriate, the father's conflict between the Indian Hindu religion, and the American way of life brings his inability to cope with immigrant living, are brought out in this story. The final eruption of violence in Mr. Bhowmick, reveals when he turns himself as an Indian goddess Kali, leads to attack his daughter, in a rolling pin, and is due to his inability to reconcile the wistful expatriate in himself with the immigrant, in his militantly feminist daughter.

Bharathi Mukherjee's "Saints", Dr. Patel's fifteen-year-old son, Shawn, doesn't feel himself to be a real American despite his American mother. As he scans the telephone directory looking for some Version of his Hindu father, he comes upon 'Batliwala' Jamshed S.M.D.'; too ignorant to recognize the name as Parsi (Batliwala is himself a minority in the Indian context), he walks at midnight to Batliwalla's 'dwarfkid' son, whom he can see studying energetically as if he, the conqueror of the alien, a kind of miniature Akbar translated to the upstate New York town to which Shawn and his mother have moved. As the story reaches its climax in the literal dark, we observe Shawn is identified at once with Ramakrishna about whom he has read in a book sent by his father-and with the emperor in the miniature painting against which Wayne thrusts his mother.

Ramakrishna Parmahansa is perhaps the best known saint of the 19th century in India. His dormant spiritual fervor was awakened and he soon dived deeper into spiritual practices. His intense meditation led him to the vision of the Goddess Kali, to whom he stayed as a simple song for the rest of his life. Not satisfied with his vision of the Mother of the Universe, Sri Ramakrishna soon sought out ways to realize God in different moods, such as the mood of a handmaid of God, a servant of the Lord, etc. With his powerful power of concentration, he was able to reach the apex of all the spiritual paths. His experiments continued with his exploration of Advaita Vedanta, Islam and finally with his experience of his spiritual union with Jesus Christ. Drawing from his own strivings, Sri Ramakrishna made a solemn statement that is as many faiths, so many paths.

Ramakrishna is never named in 'Saints', because for Shawn, the name means nothing. Readers acquainted with the renowned ascetic and visionary, however, will identify the Calcutta saint of the gift book as Ramakrishna whose famous saying is that seeing the divine mother in all things. When Saint Ramakrishna breaks an arm while entranced by the Ganges, he finds that no separation between love and pain. Mukherjee chooses the aspects of Ramakrishna that would appeal to Shawn, who resembles the Saint because he suffers and aspires to transcendence, dresses like a woman, and has a boy follower (Tran, a Vietnamese refugee).

Whether the teenage Dr. Patel really felt happiness or whether his recollection is colored by nostalgia we cannot know. We do know Shawn's misery. One moment a transfigured transvestite, another moment a breather of adolescent obscene phone calls, Shawn is one moment an American, another moment an Indian. Like saint Ramakrishna, he mentally confused about his own identity. But unlike Ramakrishna, his night-walking is accomplished in her coat, hat, and thick make-up. Told in the first person, the story poignantly describes Shawn's fantasy that, like Ramakrishna, he is in a trance in the middle of a November night. But Shawn's trance, unlike Ramakrishna's fails to relieve him of his daily pain.

Bharathi Mukherjee's another short story "Angella" presents the narrative of a Bangladeshi girl adopted by a family in Iowa after she is orphaned during the struggle for her country, Bangladesh's Independence. It is a

sad story of an immigrant from Bangladesh who can on dream of love, domesticity, babies and all the comforts that a doctor's wife can possibly enjoy in the new world. Her regular visits to the hospital to attend on Delia, convalescing from a surgery, bring her in contact with Dr. Vinny Menezies, a very successful, decent and respectful Indian immigrant, who in his middle age seeks the warmth and companionship of Angella, the narrator-protagonist. As per her attitude, Dr. Vinny and Angela come from the same subcontinent of hunger and misery. Both of them have the intention of proposing their love to each other.

Angella recalls and recounts as when she was six, soldiers with bayonets cut off her nipples. Angella heard from Sister Stella at the orphanage that the soldiers left the poor babies to die, but the Lord saved her, and it's her turn to do Him Credit. Mukherjee deftly handles the situation full of pathos, grief, grace, passion, temptation, self-sacrifice and compassionate service of Christian missionary as opposed to the brutalities of a military junta. As Angela puts her own symbolic rebirth in North America as she felt the name she was born which is lost to her, the past was lost to her. She must have seen a lot of wickedness like the rapes, the dogs chewing on dead bodies, when she was six, but she can't remember any of it.

The experience of forgiveness is at the heart of the Christian gospel. It is a forgiveness won by Christ's work on the cross which Christians believe is where God's love and justice meet. The need for forgiveness is universal, because everyone in some way shares in the guilt of messing up their own lives, the lives of others or the generous gift of this world to us by God. We need to feel pardoned and there is a longing to start again with a clean sheet. The experience of being forgiven through the mysterious work of the cross is the motivation to love and change that energizes Christians to live differently and better. God promises the gift of his Holy Spirit to help them do just that. Here in "Angella", in spite of undergoing all the miseries when she was young, she was pleased to lead her Christian life of forgiving and forgetting the past, young, miserable life.

Bharathi Mukherjee's another short story in the volume **Darkness**, "The Lady from Lucknow" is ironical in theme and technique. Beginning the story with a surrealistic picturing of a broken heart from the point of view of a small and possibly shocked girl of four, Mukherjee develops the theme of passionate love into a major cultural paradox as the Muslim protagonist matures into a young and voluptuous woman married to an engineer-manager by name Iqbal, working for the IBM in Atlanta, Georgia. Mukherjee's fictional intention in this story seems to create an ironic double-edged situation: one on the cultural, ethical level and the other on the personal-moral level.

Islam does not mandate Muslim women to be housewives; but needs her husband's permission to leave the house and take up employment. In majority of the Muslim countries, women exercise varying degrees of their religious rights with regards to marriage, divorce, legal status, dress code, and education based on different interpretations. In Mukherjee's "The Lady from Lucknow", The toddler Muslim girl Nafeesa, who was probably confused or puzzled by the logic of love-punishment-death of Husseina, later on developing an intense desire for an adulterous relationship with an elderly-65-year-old White American Intellectual. The significance of the story lies not in the theme of adultery, but in the juxtaposition of repressive cultural orthodoxy and permissive cultural heterodoxy. Mukherjee's use of irony is indeed tellingly effective. At a personal level, it is ironical that the Muslim family which moved to Rawalpindi from Lucknow "because my father wanted to protect us from the Hindu's shameful lust" should fail to preserve its cherished communal value system under the impact of an alien culture. In addition, the ironic detachment of Mukherjee is so complete that it enables her to provide the full opportunity for the character to grow and reach its limit naturally. The Lucknow-born Pakistani wife's lust and love for Dr. James Beamish reach their climax as she sheds all fear and shame even when humiliated by his middle-aged wife. Mukherjee seems to say with an ironic chuckle that now left to the permissive Americans to turn the tables on the overprotected Asian expatriates. The message seems to be loud and clear: the cloistered virtue due to one's excessive cultural conditioning is always vulnerable. She is finally sent back to her beautiful deck-house by a cab.

The United States of America has its own unique social and cultural characteristics. It is an ethnically and racially diverse country as a result of large-scale migration from many ethnically and racially different countries throughout its history. At present, Cohabitation of unmarried couple is common in the U.S. The Free Encyclopedia from Wikipedia authentically states as Cohabitation of unmarried couples totals 4.85 million couples who live together in the United States.

In Islam, sexual intercourse between a woman and any man who she is not married to is called Zina, which is considered as a religious crime in Islam. This includes extramarital sex, premarital sex and rape. It is in the list of severe crimes, that is a crime against God. If such is a case, Nafeesa's sexual intercourse with sixty five year old White American Intellectual can be considered as a crime spiritually, in one sense. But in another sense, In American's culture it has not been a big crime, where one's own violation of personal sexual desire is not severely condemnable and it is quite common there.

The three themes like cultural shock, cultural victim, and cultural adaptation interrelated with religions are vividly explored in Bharathi Mukherjee's "A Father", "Saints", "Angella", and the "The Lady from Lucknow".

"A Father" can be considered as the concept of cultural shock experienced by Bhowmick, failing to adapt the new cultural way of life, while he was deeply leading an Indian, Hindu life, forced him to eradicate his daughter's new concept of getting pregnant through artificial insemination. As a result, he is ready to even kill the baby while it is in its mother's womb. Mr. Bhowmick is scared of the Indian Hindu goddess, Kali's vengeance. Instead of waiting to undergo the punishment given by the goddess, he, himself takes the role of Kali and stabs his daughter's stomach through a rolling pin. It is obviously seen as Bhowmick is an Orthodox Hindu father fails to adapt a new culture and objects his culturally adapted daughter and wife. It is quite natural that the majority of the people follow one style of life; there is nothing wrong for a young immigrant daughter Babli to follow that style.

"Saints" come under cultural and religious identity crisis of Shawn with a Hindu Saint Ramakrishna Paramahansa. But Shawn's trance, unlike Ramakrishna's fails to relieve him of his daily pain.

"Angella" comes under the category of cultural victim. As she is brought up in the orphanage, in spite of undergoing all kinds of struggle in her young age, as per Sister Stella's advice, she learns to forgive and forget her bitter past, and it is now her turn to do some credit to the Lord by serving the affected and needed people like her.

"The Lady from Lucknow", can come under the category of cultural adaptation. Beginning the story with a surrealistic picturing of a broken heart from the point of view of a small and possibly shocked girl of four, Mukherjee develops the theme of passionate love into a major cultural paradox as the Muslim protagonist matures into a young and voluptuous woman, Nafeesa. A lady from the orthodox Muslim community dares to violate culturally, spiritually and admitted her personal passion to fulfill.

## **II. Conclusion**

Hence, Socio-Cultural redemption in terms of Cultural shock, Cultural victim, Cultural adaptation are interrelated with religion vividly depicted in Bharathi Mukherjee's short stories "A Father", "Saints", "Angella", and "The Lady from Lucknow" which extracted from her volume of Darkness.

### **Works cited**

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