

**Memory, Nostalgia, and Trauma: A Critical Study of the Short Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee**

---

**Eram Fatima<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Tariq\*<sup>2</sup>, Hafiz Mohd. Arif<sup>3</sup>, Zeb Fatima<sup>4</sup>**

---

1. Research Scholar, Department of Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow-226026, India
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English Studies and Research, J. S. Hindu PG College, Amroha-244221, India
3. Associate Professor, Department of Languages, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Integral University, Lucknow-226026, India
4. English Language Teacher, General Foundation Department, International College of Engineering and Management, Muscat, Oman.

\*Corresponding Author: lkotariqfaraz@gmail.com

---

Article Received: 18/12/2022,

Article Accepted: 20/01/2023,

Published Online: 24/01/2023,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.01.62

---

**Abstract**

The objective of the paper is to highlight how diasporic consciousness has a significant connotation of trauma, memory, and nostalgia which is prototypical and blended in nature with reference to Bharati Mukherjee's short narratives. We intend to analyze the three terms through Bharati Mukherjee's lens which acts as a foil to the thought processes of the immigrants. Her short fiction 'idealizes' the concept of memory not as a place called 'home' but as a perception of familiarity with the microcosm. The paradoxical and ambiguous notion of memory and nostalgia is that she has written it against her cultural roots, national identity, ethnicity, and location which she claims to forfeit. Memory and nostalgia are sensibilities considered "backward" and "traditional" and are a source of an impediment to a sense of belonging to the world and its settings. The female characters are caught in a traumatic web of the promise of the "American Dream" and memories of their homeland yet they adopt and adapt to their anguished 'self'. How the writer Bharati Mukherjee uses a method of "double lens" to find a stable reference point for her protagonists who are constantly under the threat of nostalgic push and pull factors will be a major term in this paper.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Memory, Nostalgia, Backward, Traditional, American Dream, Homeland, Paradoxical, Host land, Ambiguous, National Identity.

The literary representation of terms like memory, nostalgia, and trauma has not been explored to its full potential in diasporic frameworks and literature. Studying its political, social, and cultural manifestation is crucial to the age of Globalization. In diasporic narratives, nostalgia and memory are tools of cultural restoration and resiliency where the past animates the present. The past turns into the 'vital earth' to which a diasporic needs to constantly till and tend. Nostalgia nurtures memories in individuals who are dislocated. It is loneliness and alienation that compels a diaspora to subconsciously go back to memories. This happens either in physical terms or in mental space by being nostalgic. This appears that when nostalgia witches under the surface, Bharati Mukherjee punctures it with the realities of the present to move forward in times to let go of the stale memories. She does not ignore the gaps in cultural understanding but appears in no haste to fill them either.

Endel Tulving, an experimental psychologist, neuroscientist, and Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto defines memory in his work "Memory: Performance, Knowledge and Experiences" as "[M]emory is the present conscious awareness of an event that has happened in the rememberer's own past" (3). Jie Zhang, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, and a recipient of Young Investigator Award at Texas University, Dallas, categorize memory in his work as, "Memory Process and the Function of Sleep" based on time under three labels: long-term, short-term and sensory memory. Diaspora suffers from long-term memory which lasts a lifetime to recall their past days whether happy or sad. Short-term memory lasts for milliseconds but if the information lasts more than a few seconds it is termed sensory memory.

Johannes Hofer, a young Swiss scholar in his work Medical Dissertation On Nostalgia 1688 (1934) used the Greek word *nostos* for the first time which means a return to native land, and *Algos* meaning grief or suffering to define an illness discerned among Swiss students and mercenaries who were displaced. The term nostalgia was used in relation to homesickness, mental disorder, and minor insanity which could lead to identity crises, withdrawals, violence, and suicide attempts. In diasporic literature, the concept of nostalgia is blended in nature as in the case of trauma. It involves positive aspects like fun and unity and negative ones like loneliness, tragedy, and death. It is a blend of affectation, cognition, and behavior which involves recalling past experiences with feelings of fondness, and a "glow" within. Mary Ainsworth in her Classic Literature Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation (2015) reinforces the fact that people who have secured attachments or social relations usually benefit from nostalgic pulls more than people who have insecure attachments or distrust in relations.

The chief consideration of trauma studies is the psychological trauma and function of memory in sculpting cultural, and individual identities and selfhood. The studies in trauma was developed in the nineteenth century based on Sigmund Freud's theory which defines trauma as an extreme experience, challenges and ruptures language and its extent,

leading to the disruption of 'meaning' completely. The story "Angela" has a female character named Angela who is an immigrant and orphan from Bangladesh. She is adopted by a Brandon house family from Buren country, Iowa. She holds memories of her past life, where she is victimized in the Bangladesh War of Independence. The memory of home for her is the memory of scars which she recalls: "When I was six, soldiers with bayonets cut off my nipples. They left you, poor babies, for dead. Sister Stella at the orphanage would tell me... They left you for dead, but the Lord saved you. Now it's your turn to do him credit" (10). "Angela" is a story of grief, desire, enticement, selflessness, altruistic concerns, and symbolic rebirth of the protagonist in the new setting, North America- where all that she ever possessed is in the state of chaos when she utters:

The name I was born with is lost to me, the past is lost to me. I must have seen a lot of wickedness when I was six, but I can't remember any of it. The rapes, the dogs chewing on dead bodies. The soldiers. Nothing (13).

Despite the miseries, and the trauma that she undergoes in her past life, she longs to start once more, all over again with the purest sheet. She adopts the Christian way of life-based on the Gospels of forgiveness and forgetting where one acquires God's love. Childhood memories propel her to resist all amorous overtures from Dr. VinniMenezies. She thus carves out her career and serves people who were affected and needed help, a life akin to hers: "They know me, my family. I'll work well with handicapped children. With burn-center children. I'll not waste my life" (19).

In the story "Angela" we see the female character suffers from the fragmentation of the psyche due to brutal physical assault suffered in childhood. According to Freud, trauma, and hysteria originates from experiences of the earlier days of sexual assault that remain repressed in memory for a very long time. This in turn leads to nostalgia through Bharati Mukherjee's literary eye. The actual event that continues to haunt and inflict pain requires 'talking' to attain freedom from the symptom-causing syndrome. In the work of Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud's "Studies on hysteria"(1955), they mention "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences" (7). Trauma can be elucidated as a means of remembrance or an episode being harbored in the unconscious mind that leads to ego splitting or disassociation which in turn forms a "double conscience". We see in the story "Angela" that it is the fragmentation of the psyche that brings about disassociation or a gap in the memory which continued to infect her.

Bharati Mukherjee holds nostalgia as a way of "selective memory" where the past is relegated and least idealized but focuses on the flaws and previous economic and sexual impoverishment. The role of nostalgia in the short fiction of Bharati Mukherjee is dual where she adopts the technique of "double lens" to enable her characters to find fixed reference points by becoming a critique of the past world and acquire a "utopian yearning"

for a westernized life called "American dream" which they always hoped for in their penurious existence. Any memory of 'home' is considered a barrier in setting up a new perception of belonging in America. Bharati Mukherjee prohibits her characters to ponder on loving memory of the bygone days or moments of effusive attachments as they race their way into an optimistic dream-like future. Bharati Mukherjee in her essay "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman" (1991) calls her characters "Pioneers", "Middleman" or "New Settlers". These characters in their attempt to forge a diverse alliance, re-create and remake newer communities in the fertile and friendly soil of their acquired homeland out "of the hurly-burly of the unsettled magma between two worlds" ("A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman" 37). Maya Sanyal in the story "The Tenant" abandons her secure marriage, and her comfortable home in her quest for sexual liberty and a westernized lifestyle. Her past life makes her feel sorry for herself and she is full of apprehensions what ensues is that :

...She can't move. She feels ugly and unworthy. Her adult life no longer seems miraculously rebellion ; it is grim, it is perverse. She has accomplished nothing. She has changed citizenship but she hasn't broken through the light, the vigor, the hustle of the New World. She is stuck in dead space (10).

In the story, Maya undergoes a traumatic experience of a breakdown of her relationship in her past. Here, trauma can be conceived as an episode that modifies destiny and consciousness. It is in this pit of utter unrest; a span-new apprehension of the 'self' and outside world is formed. There's an element of reorientation of the consciousness due to trauma and its effects. In the story "Orbiting", Renata introduces her boyfriend Ro' to her family members at a thanksgiving dinner in her New-Jersey condominium. Bharati Mukherjee's narratives emerge from the shadows of the marginal lives of the immigrants as reflected by Ro' who is a refugee who fled from the Civil War in his home country Afghanistan as he feared detention under the Soviet regime. Here, he is trying to re-root himself in the brazen world by rebelling against his own inherited values and forgetting past dilemmas and pain as mentioned by Renata:

He becomes shy, dismissive: a pack of dogs attacked him when he was a boy. The skin on his back is speckled and lumpy from burns, and when I ask he laughs. A crazy villager whacked him with a burning stick for cheekiness, he explains. He's ashamed that he comes from a culture of pain (74).

Bharati Mukherjee aims to reconceptualize the term 'home' not as a diasporic consciousness of solace and security. She abandons residents and addresses. She seizes the attachment that her chief characters cling on to, effacing all palpable symbols that signify memories of the homeland. The characters re-route themselves where beginnings are prized over endings. The yearning here is for the host land America. She insists on being called upon an American writer and forsaking her hyphenated identity as Indo-Canadian-American

citizen. She thereby adopts the frame of a "double lens" to permit her characters to find a stable source or testimonial of their geographical bindings. She uses trauma, violence, loneliness, sexual assault, emotional scarring, physical abuse, and discrimination as a prerequisite for new identity formation in the host land. According to her in an interview on Public Broadcasting Service, News Hour, given to Bill Moyers, she says: "An immigrant is someone who in psychological, social, psychic ways has made herself or himself over in the new world. Who's accepting the new world as her own" ("Making up the Rules as I Go Along" 00:04:47).

America enables its citizens to dream big. Bharati Mukherjee emphasizes the fact to mongrelize or to fuse, to build a hopeful nation and better world. She tries to build and reinvent the idea of America as full of possibilities. Her characters are constantly fighting the evils where they do not retreat from the 'battleground' called America. Her characters possess the vigour of the land which dealt with great violence in the past to wrestle the country out from the original inhabitants and to provide a new country, a new life for its people.

We see her characters from different nationalities and ethnicities yet they all share the same diasporic urgency to be transformed. Her characters become survivors despite being victims of various forms of social oppression, traumas, injustices, and brutalities. Sharmani Patricia Gabriel in her article "Between Mosaic and Melting Pot: Negotiating Multiculturalism and Cultural Citizenship in Bharati Mukherjee's Narratives of Diaspora" explains:

I would insist that the distinctiveness of [Mukherjee's] work in the tradition of Diaspora Literature in general and American literature in particular lies in Mukherjee's ability to mine the tension that holds in balance her awareness of diaspora as a condition of loss or unhousement, involving a break in that link between cultures, people or identities and places, on the one hand, and her acknowledgment of it as a condition of gain or re-housement of recreation, re-imagination and regeneration in new social, political, cultural and geographical landscapes, on the other (para 13).

The immigrants in the stories are from the countries of the third world and they undergo enormous suffering while endangering their lives and spending a number of their finances before they step into the land of their desire. Making America as the penultimate destination, they undergo trepidations and tribulations to achieve their goals with a firm conviction of acquiring a harmonious and friendly atmosphere in a new culture. In the story "Orbiting", "Roashan managed his escape in a much more difficult manner. He was tortured in jail" (73). Jasmine in the story "Jasmine" steers her emigration to the city of Detroit through a long winding route in a stealthy way, "She crossed the border at Windsor in the

back of a grey van Laden with mattresses and box springs" (127). In "A Wife's Story", Panna Bhat the chief female character feels emotional stability in the presence of her companion Imre, who is a Hungarian. "If I hadn't left home, I'd never have heard of the Wuchang uprising. I have broadened my horizons" (31).

Bharati Mukherjee's chief characters are aware of the fact that to access their destination and embark upon a fresh beginning, it becomes essential to discard their heritable cultural, national, and religious prejudices, to eventually resort to real integration. Bharati Mukherjee is against the idea of allowing her characters to halt on fond memories. The element of nostalgia in her short fiction revolves around an image of India that is stagnant, redundant, and unaltered that lacks depth.

The characters have nostalgia for the future and yearn for a present that they have yet to encounter. They dream of acceptance in the mainstream of America as it is an emblem of socio-emotional connections and material comforts. Hence, memory, nostalgia, and trauma are collectively used as an impediment to a newer, brighter life, a new sense of belonging to the brand new slice of the "American Dream". Her fiction in this sense is very ambitious where she redefines memory, home, and nostalgia for her characters who possess portable roots and dual perspectives. This encounters ambiguity and a paradox behind these notions as the writer Bharati Mukherjee writes against the backdrop of her ethnicity, national identity, location, and her Indian moorings. Her characters transplant and metamorphose in an alien environment or reversely, a contemporary American society which becomes Bharati Mukherjee's range of "Double Lens". Her characters face the challenge to find a core question, a sense of belonging or 'home' in a world of constant drift and instabilities. 'Home' refers to being "backward" or "traditional". The characters get delocalized through the rejection of memories, and nostalgia, and by being pragmatic American. More refinement is needed to comprehend the theoretical standards of nostalgia which reflect gaps since its role in the emotional lives of people is paradoxical and needs a therapeutic outlet.

In diasporic writings, reconstruction of identities and a 'home' is not possible by a complete rejection of Indian roots, ethos, or culture. It can perpetuate new cultural studies between post-colonial binaries of modernity and tradition. Some kind of favorable association from an idealistic past is needed to provide a sense of safety when an immigrant is trying to adjust to pitfalls and obstacles in the form of the language barrier, professional and financial instability, loneliness, traumatic episodes, culture shock, etc. in a new cultural environment. Bharati Mukherjee's illegal immigrants, refugees, expellees, and exilics are marginalized communities who are unable to forsake their early days. It is through them she shares grievances common to her likes and raises an insistent voice and urges to an ultimate resonance to preserve their aspirations in a new country. This she does by providing a source of emotional resilience, a sense of inspiration, and strength, and finding newer

meaning in their dislocations. In the present millennial ennui of literary landscape, the use of cultural memory and nostalgia is written off as sentimental connotations to 'home' and 'belonging'. This could be frowned upon as a disease that aims to deform the present moment.

Bharati Mukherjee is a pioneer of new literature and new land. She has re-defined diaspora as an unhyphenated re-housemate that makes America a continent of continuous literary invention and expansion. She constructs a new immigrant writing where her home country India offers closed opportunities due to caste, family, or gender constraints whereas America represents freedom and fluidity which nevertheless comes with a price. Despite terrifying freedom and a debilitating sense of loss, her hybrid self crosses the barriers by denying the pulls of delusion and pity and attempts to grasp the exhilarating world which is full of possibilities and exotic, vibrant adventures by forging a new cultural 'self'. Thus, we see the emergence of a new metaphor "The Middleman", "New Settlers" or "The Pioneers" who become creators of their new 'selves' trying to bridge the world which is disparate in Bharati Mukherjee's short fiction.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am deeply grateful to the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor, Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Dean, Faculty of Doctoral Studies and Research, Integral University for their technical support. I owe my endless thanks and gratitude to Dr. Mohammad Tariq for his valued supervision, proofreading, corrections, and suggestions by eliciting his precious time from his very busy schedule. I also render my special thanks to Professor T. Usmani to provide me with the manuscript communication number.

### **References:**

- Ainsworth, Mary. *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of the Strange Situation*. Psychology Press and Routledge Classic Editions, 1st Edition, 29 June, 2015.
- "A Four-Hundred-Years-Old Woman". *The writer on her work: New Essays in New Territory*, Vol.2, Ed. Janet Sternburg, W.W. Norton, London, New York, pp. 33-38, 1991.
- Alam, Fakrul. *Bharati Mukherjee*. Twayne, New York, 1996.
- Breuer, Joseph and Sigmund Freud. "Studies on Hysteria". *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol.2, translated by James Strachey, Hogarth Press, London, 1995, p. 7.
- Buelens, Gert, et al., editors. *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism*, London, Routledge.
- Devi, Itishree. "Singing In A Strange Land: Cultural Dissonance in Bharati Mukherjee

- Narrative". *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol.6, issue 2, April 2018.
- Gabriel, Sharmani Patricia. "Between Mosaic and Melting Pot: Negotiating Multiculturalism and Cultural Citizenship in Bharati Mukherjee's Narratives of Diaspora". *Postcolonial Text*, Vol. 1, No. 2, December, 2008.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, New York, 1992.
- Hofer, Johannes. "Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia, 1988". *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* Vol. 2, No. 6, The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 376-391, August 1934.
- Mukherjee, Bharati. *Darkness*. Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1990.
- . *The Middleman and Other Stories*. Grove Press, New York, 1998.
- . "American Dreamer". *Mother Jones Magazine*, Jan/Feb 1997, pp. 1-6.
- . "Being an American Writer". *Writers on America*, U.S. Department of State Publication, 22 May 2008.
- . "A Four- Hundred –Year- Old Woman". *The Writer on Her Work: New Essays in New Territory*, Ed. Janet Sternburg, vol. 2, W. W. Norton, New York, pp. 33-38.
- . "American Dreamer". *Mother Jones Magazine*, pp. 1-6. Jan/Feb, 1997.
- . "Being an American Writer". *Writers on America*, U.S, Department of State Publication, 22 May 2008.
- Moyers, Bill. "Bill Moyers Interview Bharati Mukherjee". *Iowa Review*, PBS, Video, June 20, 2009.
- S, Indira. "Jasmine: An Odyssey of Unhousement and Enhousement". *Commonwealth Writing: A Study in Expatriate Experience*, Ed. R.K. Dhawan and L.S.R. Krishna Sastri, Prestige Books, New Delhi, 1994.
- Sharma, Maya Manju. "The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant". *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspective*, Ed. Emmanuel S. Nelson, Garland Publishing, New York, London, 1993.
- Tulving, Endel. "Memory: Performance, Knowledge and Experience". *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology*, vol. 1, no.1, 1989, pp. 3-26.
- Zhang, Jie. "Memory Process and the Function of Sleep". *Journal of Theoretic*, vol.6, December 2004, pp. 1-7.