
Pain of Exile in Bharati Mukherjee's Short Stories - A Study

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Article Received: 04/03/2025

Article Accepted: 05/04/2025

Published Online: 06/04/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.195

Abstract:

The fiction of expatriate writers has gained considerable recognition, and it has attracted worldwide attention and acclaim. The majority of the Indo-Anglian writers who settled abroad write from the experience of conflicts, tensions, discriminations, victimizations, and frustration suffered by them. Their works reflect the lives of Third World people who are caught between two cultures. They find themselves unable to confront and live in a world so different from the one left behind. They look back on their native country with nostalgia, satirically celebrating their liberation, but also look skeptically at their new homeland as outsiders, with a feeling of something having been lost in the process of growth. Their works reveal the expatriate's ability to tolerate, accommodate, and absorb other cultures. Kamala Markandaya, Salman Rushdie, and Bharati Mukherjee may perhaps be the best exponents of expatriate writing.

This paper seeks to explore the theme of "Pain of Exile" in three short stories by Bharati Mukherjee, namely, **Hindus, A Father, and Visitors**. The short stories dealt with in this paper are considered together on the basis of the common theme of "Pain of Exile," which is a part of the expatriate experience. Accordingly, an attempt has been made to study the expatriate experience in various aspects like racial discrimination, nostalgia, and the expatriate inability to adjust to the new world.

Keywords: Expatriate writer, Third World people, racial discrimination, nostalgia, expatriate experience, Pain of Exile,

Introduction:

Expatriation is a widespread phenomenon, and George Steiner describes the expatriate writer as "the contemporary everyman." "The expatriate sensibility" is considered to be a legitimate literary term, both by Parameswaran and Alastair Niven. "Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion which includes a longing for the past, often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an

assumption of moral or cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment." As Emmanuel S Nelson Writes "the migratory experience invariably entails pain, for it involves an unhealable rift from home and tradition. Even when migration offers new forms of personal and political freedom and an enhanced material of wellbeing, the pleasures are subverted by a sense of loss, discontinuity, and broken identity".

Bharati Mukherjee deals with the problems of Third World immigrants in her fiction. Her protagonists are sensitive, and they try to adjust to the new world. They have a nostalgic longing for their native country. As Irving Howe has identified, "Nostalgia is the real reason for the expatriate's need to evoke ethnic origins. Third World immigrants are subjected to racism, sexism, and other forms of social oppression in the new world. Some of them are even exploited by the natives of the new world. Mukherjee says:

In myself, I detect a pale and immature reflection of Naipaul; it is he who has written movingly about the pain and absurdity of art and exile, of third-world art and exile among the former colonizers, the tolerant incomprehension of hosts, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a desh.

Canadian citizens of Indian origin faced untold difficulties in Canada. Mukherjee strongly opposed racial prejudices and turned out to be a civil rights activist. She wrote essays about racial discrimination and its tragic consequences. She was eventually diverted from creative writing to matter-of-fact writing. She resigned from her professorship at McGill University because she was not comfortable as an alien in Canada. She migrated to the United States in 1980 and became a U.S.A. citizen in 1988. She was quite comfortable in America. Though Indian immigrants are subjected to racial discrimination, they are free to lead a harmonious life in America, unlike in Canada. Americans received Mukherjee's writings with more enthusiasm than Canadians did because: "Canadians attitude in the 1960s and 1970s was that one did not have anything relevant to say to the Canadian readers if one did not play in snow and grownup eating oatmeal."

Bharati Mukherjee's non-fiction work **Days and Nights in Calcutta** is about a yearlong visit that the couple Bharati Mukherjee and Clark Blaise made to India. **The Sorrow and the Terror** deals with the journalistic account of the crash of an Air India jet off the coast of Ireland in 1985. In so far as short stories are concerned, Bharati Mukherjee's **Darkness** consists of twelve stories. Four stories, namely **The World according to HSU, Isolated Incidents, Hindus, and Courtly Vision**, were written in Canada, Montreal, and Toronto. Mukherjee comments on these stories in her introduction, "The purely Canadian stories in this collection were difficult to write and even more painful to live through. They are uneasy stories about expatriation". When she was in Canada, Mukherjee discovered that the country is hostile towards its citizens who hail from different Asian countries. She thought of herself as an expatriate in Canada. She says:

In my fiction, and in my Canadian experience. "Immigrants" were lost souls, put

upon and pathetic. Expatriates, on the other hand, knew all too well who and what they were and what foul fate had befallen them.

The remaining stories in this collection are **Angela, The Lady from Lucknow, A Father, Nostalgia, Tamurlane, Saints, Visitors, and The Imaginary Assassin**. Most of these stories were written in the spring of 1984 in Atlanta, Georgia, when she was writer-in-residence at Emory University. Mukherjee says that the transformation as a writer and as a resident of the new world occurred with the act of immigration to the United States. She says, "For me, it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration."

The other collection, **The Middleman and Other Stories**, consists of eleven stories. They are **The Middleman, A wife's story, Danny's Girls, The Management of Grief, Loose Ends, Orbiting, Fighting for the Rebound, Fathering, The Tenant, Jasmine, and Buried Lives**. In a Massachusetts interview, Mukherjee explicitly states her aim in her writings: We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society. I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country.

Bharati Mukherjee focuses on the experiences of Third World people in her short fiction. The Third World people migrate to Canada and America to make their lives better. The expatriate faces many problems in the host country because the white host does not treat him as an equal. He is unable to adjust himself to the new world, and at the same time, he is unable to return home. He looks back with nostalgia for his native country and the culture he has left behind. He is subjected to racial discrimination and experiences like loneliness, a sense of rootlessness, and the pain of exile in the host country. He also suffers from the fear of survival. He is a marginal man and homeless.

Mukherjee depicts the experiences of immigrants who dream of a new life in the new world and face travails and tribulations to reach their goals. The immigrants yearn for unrestricted freedom and wish to live in a world free from inhibitions, customs, and traditions. They want to repudiate their past life and past country. The immigrants include both men and women who hail from different parts of the world. She also depicts the experiences of immigrants in their native countries before their immigration. The immigrants undergo deep suffering and take big risks because they believe that America is their final destination. She also gives a realistic picture of middlemen who arrange fake visas, passports, transports, jobs, etc.

Bharati Mukherjee deals with women protagonists in her short fiction who hail from various countries yearning for unrestricted freedom in the new world. They are against the

age-old traditions and wish to experience full freedom in the new world. Since they find no stability, they form relationships with men in the new world. Mistaking their illicit relationship for individuality and liberty, they satisfy their lust for sensuality. They are disillusioned finally and realize that women have some restrictions even in America. Mukherjee gives a realistic picture of characters and situations in America. She also talks about the impact of these immigrants on the lives of Americans in her short fiction.

The story **Hindus** deals with the nostalgia and the pain and grievance of an expatriate. In this story, Bharati Mukherjee brings out the contrast between an expatriate and an immigrant who hails from the same country. Leela Lahiri, the narrator of this first-person narrative, reveals an immigrant's fluid identity. She proudly declares that she is an American citizen, but she is also proud of her Bengali Brahmin past. H.R.H. Maharaja Patwant Singh of Gotlah is an obvious expatriate with a grievance against India for not having treated him well. Writing his memoirs with nostalgia, he is an expatriate to the core. While Maharaja expresses his pain and grievance, Leela celebrates rebirth in the new world. The story implies that the expatriate stance is futile.

Leela is married to a white man called Derek, a filmmaker. Pat tells Derek about his past life in India, having intimacy with Leela from her childhood. But Leela, on the other hand, disclaims connections with Pat in India. She desires to celebrate her present life in the new world and is proud of her American citizenship. She tells Leela, "I haven't been home in ages; I am an American citizen." This new life in America brought a lot of change in Leela. Pat is surprised to learn that she has the freedom to move anywhere in America. Commenting about the loyalty of their servant Gulseng, Pat wonders that people like Gulseng are rare to find these days. He tells about the change in his country:

The country's changed totally, you know, Pat continued. Crude rustic types have taken over. The dhoti-wallahs, you know what I mean, they would wrap themselves in loin cloths if it got them more votes. No integrity, no finesse. The country's gone to the dogs. (Darkness, P-135). Pat suffered bitter experience in India. The communists have taken him to custody like a common dacoit. He was accused of smuggling and imprisoned for selling heirlooms to Americans. He expresses his inveterate hatred towards his native land. He tells: No one at home understands their value. Here, I can sell off a little Pahari painting for ten thousand dollars. Americans understand our things better than we do ourselves. India wants me to starve in my over-grown palace. (Darkness, P- 135)

Pat's life was miserable in India. He was tormented for three nights in jail like a common dacoit. He bemoans thus: "I have nothing. They've stripped me of everything. At night I hear jackals singing in the courtyard of my palace." (Darkness, P-135-136). He tells Leela that their country has driven them abroad with whatever assets they could salvage. But Leela has neither regrets for having left her country nor even nostalgic about it. Her attitude towards her country shows a radical departure from that of Pat's:

I did not feel my country owed me anything. Comfort, perhaps, when I was there, a different

comfort when I left it. India teaches her children. you have seen the worst. Now go out and don't be afraid. (Darkness, P-135)

Leela gets parted from her husband Derek and takes up a mediocre job in a publishing house as an Administrative Assistant. Her boss, Bill Haines is a former juggler. The entire Bengali community knows all about Leela. Pat meets Leela after a couple of years at her office with her boss. Pat is introduced to her as one of their new authors. Pat is evidently nostalgic and recalls his past. Pat and Leela's father spend their free time in Sundarban forest. Leela's father saved Pat from Indian government persecution. Pat starts writing his memoirs and writing becomes everything to Pat and Leela reads these manuscripts: In spite of the arch locutions and the aggrieved posture that Pat had stubbornly clung to, I knew I was reading about myself, blind and groping conquistador who had come to the New World too late. (Darkness, P-141).

Besides dealing with the experience of Pat before imagination, Mukherjee realistically portrays the pain and grievance of Pat who is nostalgic and at the same time expresses his hatred towards his native country. Through Leela, Mukherjee has presented the life of an immigrant who is capable of adjusting to the new world.

The short story entitled **A Father** deals with the expatriate's inability to adjust to the new world and his experience of loneliness in spite of his Americanized wife and daughter. It is the story of Mr. Bhowmick, a middle-aged, middle-class Bengali from Ranchi. His migration to the United States is thus a part of an unending chain of journeys in search of a better life all over the world and within India too. He has given up his dream of beauty to marry an uncouth but rich girl whose father would finance another and even more important dream for a struggling middle class Bengali, of two years study in America

Two years stay in America has changed his wife from pliant girl to ambitious woman. She wanted America and nothing less, and when he returned to Ranchi she had refused to conform to the standards of middle class Indian existential life, but had screamed and wept until he applied for permanent resident status in America. While his papers were being processed he had found another job in Bombay which meant another migration of a lesser kind which has satisfied them both. Then the long awaited green card had arrived, and he and his wife and daughter had finally left for America and settled in Detroit

Mr. Bhowmick's wife, an agnostic has very quickly adjusted to her new way of life, while he himself feels lonely, in spite of his social interaction with other Bengalis and his hobbies. But there is no question of going back where he had come from. All through his teenage years, he had dreamed of success abroad. What form of success he would take is only vague? Success would mean to him to escape from the constant plotting and bitterness that wore out India's middle class.

Mr. Bhowmick is not happy with his daughter either. She is another big

disappointment. The most intelligent of all the Bengali Children in Detroit, his daughter Babli earns well as an engineer. She can sing Hindi film songs and has taken lessons in Indian dancing; Bhowmick strongly feels that these accomplishments do not add upto real femininity "She was not womanly or tender the way that unmarried girls had been in the wistful days of his adolescence"

Bhowmick's role of a father pales into insignificance and he turns to religion, therefore, for solace, for his life is bleak and stereotyped, his marriage a mere meaningless ritual. More so, his wife speaks irreverently of her religion which has become her way of surviving in a city that is both naive to her and alien. But his daughter Babli is invariably on his wife's side. He cannot share his feelings and emotions with the women in the family: "The women in his family were smarter than him. They were cheerful, outgoing, more American somehow." (Darkness, p.61).

One day to his utter shock, Bhowmick discovers that his daughter is pregnant but perhaps only to be expected in such a society. The idea excites him. At twenty- six Babli had found the man of her dreams, whereas at twenty-six Mr.Bhowmick has given up on truth, beauty and poetry and exchanged them for his study. When he found his wife screaming and attacking his daughter with a rolling pin, he tries to stop her, telling her that it was her fault and not Babli's:

Girls like Babli were caught between the rules, that's the point he wished to make. They were too smart, too impulsive for a backward place like Ranchi, but not tough nor smart enough for sex-crazy places like Detroit. (Darkness, p.72). The truth is that Babli is neither interested in getting married nor in love. She becomes pregnant through artificial insemination to beget a child. As Urbhashi Barat says:

Babli's rejection of a father for her unborn child is also her rejection of her own father and everything that paternity stands for and that Mr. Bhowmick had clung to in the exile of an adopted home, indeed, because he can suddenly identify Babli with Kali, it seems to him that his goddess, too, has deserted him."

The story thus deals with a piquant situation in which the cultural and ethnic encounter is not between the individuals but attitudes acquired as well as preserved between reason and superstition. Here we may recall Aldous Huxley's scientific fiction "Brave the New World" in which it was predicted that test tube babies would become probable. The Bhowmicks are horrified to know that their brilliant plain daughter, Babli, an Electrical Engineer, wants to have a baby by artificial insemination outside wed lock. When confronted by the fantasising father and the shocked mother, the pregnant Babli replies "Who needs a man? She hissed. The father of my baby is a bottle and a syringe. Men louse up your lives. I just want a baby" (Darkness, p.72).

It may be said here that Bharati Mukherjee has portrayed, in her short story life as trial, not promise, the individual as victim, marginalized, bound to her psychological ghetto,

and learning to face the reality of existence.

The short story **Visitors** deals with the protagonist Vinita who is caught in the horns of the expatriate dilemma of being transfixed between two cultures. She accepts without question a marriage arranged for her by her parents. Six days after her wedding, she takes an Air India Flight to Citizenship in the new world. Her husband Sainen Kumar, who is an accountant is well mannered and good looking man. He is a Stephen's graduate who studied in London University and Harvard. Vinita's husband, whom she hardly knows is ambitious and intends to become a millionaire in New York City. He and his friends are concerned to become too American, because their nostalgic bond with India gives them a kind of security, and because they realise that their racial and cultural difference makes it impossible for them to be completely assimilated by the New World.

Vinita is quite comfortable with her new life in the New World though it is not her considered opinion to move to another continent. Her house is equipped with coordinated linen for bed and bath, gleaming appliances and sleek Bloomingdale furniture. She finds that life in America is quite different from that of the life in India. In America, People are known for hard work, busy and distraught from over work. She even worries about the building's door man Castro. Vinita thinks that married life in an alien country without near and dear around may likely to change her to become mature, complex and fascinating as we see in the following lines Discreet, dutiful, comfortable with her upper class status, she had been trained by her mother to stay flexible, to roll with whatever punches the Communist government of Calcutta might deliver

The world of America which she knows mainly from soap operas she watches on television while her husband is at work seems to offer an adventure and opportunity "to size up the situation and make up one's own rules" (Darkness, p.167). She believes it also offers the kind of passion she does not know with her husband as we see in these lines, "She has put herself on the television screen, in the roles of afternoon wives taken in passion. (Darkness, P.171)

Mrs. Leela Mehra and Mrs. Kamila Thapar visit Vinita's house one afternoon. After tea they advise her on which Indian grocers carry the fresh tropical produce in the "Little India" block on Lexington. When Sainen Kumar was new to America, the Thapars and the Mehra's looked after him very well. The two women used to hum old Hindi film songs to tease him into nostalgia. After visitors leave, Vinita mails letters to her parents, friends, sister and mother Stella on a pale aerogramme paper which makes her feel cheerful. While writing a last letter, a third visitor, Mr. Rajiv Khanna, a graduate student arrives whom she has met at the cultural evenings organised by one of the Indian Associations in Manhattan. He tells her Rooma Devi's visit to Columbia and adds: "Mrs Kumar, I thought you would be interested in dance performances." (Darkness, P.166). It is up to her to take the decision to invite him in or otherwise:

In India, she would feel uncomfortable- she knows she would! if she found herself

in an apartment alone with a man not related to her, but the rules are different in Gutenberg. Here one has to size up the situation and make up one's own rules. Or is it, here, that one has to seize the situation (Darkness P.166-167)

When the youth flatters Vinita that she has the grace of a danseuse, she feels elegant and elated. He hangs his cap on the ear of one of her husband's clay horses and tells her she is the goddess of his heart. She hates him for considering her lascivious and thinks that he is mad man and obviously realises that his attitude towards her is like that of her husband. She had assumed that he was the looter of American culture, not hers, and she had envied the looting. Her own transition was slow and wheezing (Darkness, P.172)

She nips her passion and flatters his intelligence and she elevates herself to the role of older sister. The visitor departs after finishing his tea. Sailen comes home with Vinod Mehra and Kapoor. Vinita cooks a six-course dinner and it was ecstatic: She serves the men and manipulates them with her youth and her beauty and her unmaskable charm. She has no idea that she is on the verge of hysteria. (Darkness, P.176)

Vinita has never experienced passion in her marriage though Sailen treats her like a queen of his heart. She is tormented in America with the possibility of passion and self-expression. For the first time in America, she suffers from insomnia that particular night. She longs to embrace the alien world in spite of her devoted husband and a fabulous condominium. The romantic overtures of the lonely Indian student create in her a longing to leave her husband, "the haven of his expensive condominium and run off into the alien American night where only shame and disaster can await her" (Darkness, 176). The frustration and disturbance of Vinita results from her inability to cope with the confusion arising from cultural collision.

The story thus deals with the undermining in America of the myths and illusions about marriage with which an Indian woman is brought up. When Rajiv comes to her house in her husband's absence, Vinita's mind begins to snap because the romantic notions of wife hood combined with the Indian elite's idea of the US as paradise do not fit the reality. In this story, it is Rajiv Khanna who has problems coming to terms to America who wants to become her lover but it is unlikely that they have sexual relations. The story finally ends with the protagonist's longing to embrace alien dangerous America.

To sum up in **Hindus**, Mukherjee juxtaposes an expatriate against an immigrant to draw out the contrast. The story titled **A Father** is about straddling of two cultures. Mr. Bhowmick who migrates to the U.S. in search of a better life is unable to take root in that alien culture. Lastly, the story **Visitors** emerges out of frustration resulting out of Vinita's inability to cope with the confusion arising from cultural collision

Thus, the characters in these stories are fragmented, disintegrated and alienated. Like VS Naipaul, Mukherjee tries to explore state-of-the art expatriation and uses a mordant and self-protective irony in describing the characters' pain of exile. Salman Rushdie has

sensitively felt and expressed the dilemma of migrants who have at best **Imaginary Homelands** which sums up migrant's alienation and sense of loss. Rushdie like VS Naipaul, regards migration as a form of re-birth and holds that a writer can bring his new world into being by an act of pure will. Rushdie takes up another theme using history in fiction and its interrelationship with fantasy. In **Midnight's Children**, he tries to give a shape to the form of fiction to suit his needs. The views and reviews contained in Rushdie's **Imaginary Homelands** are interesting and his pronouncements on the predicament of migrants and on issues pertaining to fiction are sufficient theoretical work which may provide for analysis and evaluation of Rushdie's fictional works"

Two other women writers -Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala are expatriates who write about East-West confrontation and the resultant identity crisis. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala deals with the theme of expatriates in India. Bharati Mukherjee's short fiction also supports the theme of East-West encounter as well as the reenactment of the personal dilemma of the repatriate writers themselves with all the accompanying trauma, disillusionment and disappointment. In this context it is pertinent to note that Bharati Mukherjee has drawn inspiration from Bernard Malamud and has dedicated this work to his memory.

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Citation:

Sridevi, Kumara. "Pain of Exile in Bharati Mukherjee's Short Stories – A Study." *International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2025, pp. 186–195. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.04.195.