MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS IN THE NOVELS OF KAMALA MARKANDAYA AND BHARATI MUKHERJEE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Abstract of the Thesis
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Abstract

Kamala Markandaya and Bharati Mukherjee, post-colonial writers of the Indian diaspora, delineate in their works the issues of cultural tension, torn identities, expatriate experience, immigrant identities, cultural assimilation, cultural separation, exilement, cultural identity, authenticity, and orientalism. Both are primarily concerned with the displacement that results from the meeting of two cultures. Their concerns overlap; however, their differing ideas of “home” and cultural space give very different shapes to their stories and their language. Markandaya’s characters lose their foothold on the original culture and remain isolated on the peripheries of the new one, while Mukherjee’s characters carve out their niche in those fringes, eventually changing both the mainstream and themselves. The study also traces the arc of immigrant writing and examines the ways in which the most recently arrived have sought to assimilate into, reconfigure or reject the visited land and its dreams. The nation remains inhospitable to new-comers, its inhabitants reluctant to give up any portion of their hard-earned success. They must prove themselves worthy and assimilate. Residing abroad is like learning English— it is something the immigrant achieves over time; it is only through pain and sacrifice, by overcoming prejudice, social exclusion and economic hardship that he finally adapts himself. It is not, therefore, an easy dream to access. For those who manage to gain a sense of belonging or who come with a view to making home, indeed, there is a price to pay for such inclusion.
Post-colonial writers are always asked some questions. Do they romanticize their homelands? Do they create and represent their actual homelands, or, as Salman Rushdie calls them, “Imaginary Homelands?” How do they voice their native thoughts with their colonizers’ vocabulary? Perhaps most significantly, these questions are still being hotly debated at kitchen tables. Do immigrant parents and English-speaking children meet across the linguistic divide? If language is, indeed, a vehicle for culture, then is theirs a hopeless struggle—the linguistic divide now having become a cultural chasm?

These questions persist because they point to the very core of our identities. They ask if we are natives or foreigners. Once expatriated should we ever look back or must we always pioneer ahead? As national boundaries and identities become fluid, and as an increasing number of us leave our place of birth, these questions become ever more pertinent. As the works of Bharati Mukherjee and Kamala Markandaya show us, such questions of identity bear heavily upon all aspects of our lives— and, of course, the works of these writers. They affect the memories they keep, the character of the new homes they build, and the language they used to describe both of these. Markandaya uses formal, largely “un-Indianized” English while Mukherjee freely sprinkles her text with Hindi words. The authors’ perceptions not only shape their characters’ lives, but also forecast their struggle in their adopted homes. These perceptions also determine their place in post-colonial literature.

Mukherjee expects flexibility from immigrants. They should not rigidly
hold on to the icons of a lost past. Rather, they should move forward, create and be created by, their new homes. In this ideal, there is little room for romanticizing the past or for playing the victim of a lost culture. Mukherjee challenges immigrants to transform themselves and their new country.

Kamala Markandaya, on the other hand, maintains a more conservative stand on this issue of immigration. She represents here the older school of thought in post-colonial literature than does Mukherjee. For Markandaya, the East is East, and its meeting with the West invariably results in tragedy. History seems to validate her views: emerging from nearly a millennium of foreign rule—British for two hundred years and before that Mughal—India saw all East-West encounter as head-on collisions. The two traditions—Indian and Western—often at butt heads, and until only very recently the latter invariably won, leaving the former scathed, humiliated, feeling completely victimized. For Markandaya, the East is pastoral, innocent, and replete with fond memories, despite its often tragic history.

Thus, Markandaya’s perception of the process of immigration is very different from Mukherjee’s. For her, there is no easy absorption of one culture by another; one culture always suffers a mortal blow. Without exception, in Markandaya’s works, that one culture is the Indian. Of course, Mukherjee could admit readily that one culture must submit—indeed, must often die—in order for the new, immigrant culture to emerge. But in her works, one rarely senses nostalgia for days past. Whereas Mukherjee looks forward to a world of
possibilities, Markandaya is suspicious of the glitter. Whereas Mukherjee willingly pays the price of cross-culturalization, Markandaya laments the heavy dues.

The thesis is divided into six chapters. The opening chapter of the thesis, titled Introduction, discusses both the affinity as well as the basic differences in the outlook of these two authors in the light of their biological and creative fields more precisely. Why does Markandaya have the label of fidelity while Mukherjee the opposite trait? What are the events that compelled Mukherjee to show such dedication and affection towards the United States? Apart from addressing these major questions the chapter goes on to discuss the continual oscillation of immigrant people between their home and the host country, their clashes and also their problems of understanding and misunderstanding. Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*, *The Nowhere Man* and *Possession* have been discussed alongside Mukherjee’s *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Jasmine*.

In Chapter II, the crisis of identity, theme of displacement, East-West encounter and conflict between the tradition and modern attitude have been shown in the novels *Nectar in a Sieve*, *Two Virgins*, *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. In *Nectar in a Sieve* the protagonist cum story-teller Rukmani represents the rural, Eastern, uncivilized traditional woman while Dr. Kenny is absolutely contrary to her qualities. Setting up of a tannery on the agricultural field is essentially a gobbling up or victory over the productive field of farmers by industrialization. It is a defeat of rurality and establishment of
urbanity.

The theme of *Two Virgins* is a variation of *Nectar in a Sieve*. It concerns with the conflict between the village and the city life. It is a story of two sisters—Lalitha and Saroja representing the modern and the traditional outlook respectively. Lalitha breaking all the taboos and shackles of society heads towards the city’s glamour where she, eventually, gets seduced and get pregnant. When Saroja comes to know about this, she visits the city with her parents to confront the seducer of her sister. Through this story Markandaya tries to teach a lesson to society that women need to be given more security and opportunity in order to flourish in life.

Dimple of Mukherjee’s *Wife* is much fascinated by the happiness of wifehood before marriage. But after wedlock her imagination shatters in such a way that she begins to seek it in western life, where again she is bereaved and this leads her towards a state of hallucination. Jasmine, one of the widely known characters of Bharati Mukherjee, represents a challenging woman against the patriarchal superiority over female subjections. The transformation of Jasmine is crucial, from Jyoti of Hasnapur to Jase of the United States. Tara Bhattacharjee of *Desirable Daughters* is an embodiment of the independent woman. The leitmotif of the novel is quest for identity. Tara is on a mission of discovery to reveal the identity of Tara Lata, the tree bride and of Chris. The novel is full of irony—or one can say retrospective irony—as the character always encounters something contrary to her expectations. When Tara and Bish settle at Stanford
after marriage, Tara says “This is the life I’ve been waiting for, I thought, the liberating promise of marriage and travel and the wider world.” (81). But soon she realizes that the life she is going to live there is not as it seems. It is full of clash, conflict, and dissatisfaction.

In Chapter III, the questions of authenticity have been raised against these two authors who have been living abroad and writing about India. How much their portrayal and representation of Indian life is genuine, constitutes the main argument of the discussion. The difference between these authors is that Markandaya glorifies India while Mukherjee is critical of it. While the former sets up her story, often, in pastoral landscape, the latter does it in urban city life.

The opinions of Markandaya and Mukherjee about orientalism have been explicitly discussed. Markandaya conforms to the norms of orientalism in her novels and never tries to be unfair towards Indians while Mukherjee does not sympathize with Indians at all. She leaves them struggling like some wreckage without any support.

According to Mukherjee, migrating Indians adopt the USA as their new home and new culture and it is almost as if they are reborn there. They begin afresh with a new enthusiasm, a newly created vicinity and especially with a new mindset. Unlike Mukherjee Markandaya never seems critical of Indians. In fact, she usually praised. Critic Gooneratne blames Markandaya for misrepresentation of a certain village regarding the portrayal of a farmer’s lifestyle.
Chapter IV of the thesis focuses on the use of language. In her writings Markandaya rarely uses any Hindi word. Instead she tries to translate its essence in English, except for her latest novel *Bombay Tiger*. Mukherjee, on the contrary, frequently uses Hindi words—‘kirtan’, ‘pujah’, ‘pahari’ because she knows well that translation of these words cannot express the real meaning and understanding. Sometimes it is very difficult to give a real sense through translation (for instance the word ‘aap’.) Very often translation from one language to another creates a ridiculous image like translating of ‘Gai-Mata’ as mother cow. Here, in translation, we do not get the sense of reverence towards the sacred cow as it is found in the Hindu religion.

Chapter V delineates the characterization of protagonists of Markandaya’s novels from *Nectar in a Sieve* to *Bombay Tiger* and of Mukherjee’s works from *The Tiger’s Daughter* to *Miss New India*.

The foregoing discussions are summarized in the concluding chapter which sums up the arguments and facts dealt with earlier.

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