CHAPTER V

HER FICTIONAL TECHNIQUE

This chapter focuses on the narrative technique of the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, which is an important aspect of her fictional presentation. We see among traditional oral stories, myths, and folktales in India, the themes of marriage and gender roles are central. Unlike the male-centered tales in which the hero figure wins the bride as a reward, in the woman-centred tales, as in the classical analogues of Sahkuntala and Savitri, it doesn’t seem enough for a woman to be married. She has to earn her husband, her married state, through a rite of passage, a period of unmerited suffering. It is only in the end, through the “telling of her own story to a ‘significant other’ that the “silent woman” becomes a “speaking person”. In the traditional tales, however, the “silent woman” and the “speaking person” are the “teller of tales”. In the traditional stories, neither the “silent woman” nor the “speaking person” challenges the assigned gender roles in marriage. By internalizing the prevailing definition of woman’s role in marriage is one of suffering and endurance, the tales present the outcome of the story, that is, happiness in marriage, as a reward for these self-sacrifices. A heroine figure from Hindu mythology, Savitri, challenges Yama, the God of Death, to return life to her
husband, Satyavan, as narrated in the Puranas. She uses wit and intellect and displays courage in achieving this end. Pleasing Yama with her intellectual agility and wisdom, Savitri obtains a boon from him; he agrees to grant her any wish she desires, except the life of her husband. With clever forethought and presence of mind, Savitri asks that she be blessed with progeny, and Yama grants her this wish. Her observation that she, as a “chaste woman”, cannot have children if her husband is dead wins over Yama. He finally surrenders Savitri her husband. It is not surprising that traditional patriarchal renderings of Savitri’s tale tend to emphasize a woman’s “chastity” and “goodness”, rather than her intellect and wisdom.

Bharati Mukherjee, the writer of immigrant tales in America, underscores the reinvention of the woman-centered oral tale in the narrative structure and thematic content of Jasmine. She unravels the triple voice-strands in the complex triad of the Jyoti-Jasmine-Jane persona. Jyoti, “the silent woman”, has a certain kind of existence and identity. In the traditionally feudalistic Punjab, in an environment of fatalism, casteism, and classism, the power of speech is usurped by the dominant male figures. In the family – centered society, these figures are the father, the brothers, and eventually the husband. Jyoti, as her name implies, is a “light” that brightens a household – a very traditional name, rich with associations of the woman as the Lakshmi goddess figure. She is
visible but apparently unheard. So do all the forces in her environment train her to become, despite her inner outrage and conflict. Jyoti begins her life as a “silent woman” foretold by the village astrologer of her “widowhood and exile”; told by her mother that the bruise around her throat was to spare her the agony of a dowryless marriage; told by her grandmother Dida that Jyoti’s personal courage, exhibited in her courageous skilling of the mad dog, was inconsequential. With Prakash, her husband, she begins a new life. She is told to adopt the more modern values of a city woman. Renamed as Jasmine, the protagonist reflects on the paradoxes and ironies of the two worlds – feudal and modern. At first, caught between the interspaces of these two words, Jasmine’s voice effects her desires and feelings as an echo of her training and conditioning in a feudalistic environment. She wants children at the age of fifteen because women in the village were beginning to talk. Prakash begins the process of retraining Jasmine: the overthrow of feudal mentality involves a redefinition of gender roles within marriage. Jasmine’s preconditioned voice is trained by Prakash to argue and fight off she does not agree with him – to want for herself, a lesson that Jasmine learns as she later empowers her voice with speech. Within the parameters of socially accepted gender roles and their defiance by her husband, she moves from the position of being told to that of telling.
With Prakash's brutal death and Jasmine's odyssey into self-exile and illegal entry into the Florida backwater, begins the telling of the “speaking person’s” tale – one of struggle, violence, wonder, despair, survival, and transformation. This telling is perhaps the most haunting part of the narrative – alternating between the fluidity of voicing through self-reflection, interior monologue, and figurative language, mythologizing her new experience through the oral medium of creating “new proverbs” to the strain of unvoicing through narrative pauses, mental blocks, and silence by volition.

During this phase, Jasmine recasts her role as the observant traveler, the restless journey, as well as the intrepid adventurer. Hurtling from the confines of an Indian widow’s bleak imprisonment, she runs into the harsh brutality of illegal entry, rape, and murder in America. The ensuing silence of horror that cloaks Jasmine’s world is literalized in her cutting of her tongue; Goddess Kali – like, she pours blood from her mouth on Half-Face, the modern avatar of evil. In Jasmine’s inarticulation is exemplified her silent power to transform her self-image as Lakshmi, goddess of domestic bliss, to Kali, the war goddess. Unlike Dimple Das Gupta, the protagonist in Mukherjee’s novel Wife, who “loses sight of reality as she sinks into the world of television... she kills her husband as he complacently eats a bowl of cereal”, Jasmine has a goal in sight. Any thought of self-destruction in the spotless bathroom of the motel where Half-Face had
raped her comes to a fierce end. She prepares herself for her mission of self-immolation after burning her husband’s suit under the palm trees of the college campus in Tampa. It is a bizarre goal, but one born out of despair, anger, and frustration at the violence of traditional customs as well as progressive, modern societies.

The voiceless Jyoti as Laskhsmi and the tongueless Kali are both “silent women” – postcolonial products as well as critics of those aspects of both traditional and modern cultures. Neither passive submission nor active violence is the norm by which Jasmine seeks to define her identity. It is in Lillian Gordon’s home, a place of refuge for outcasts and illegal aliens, that Jasmine recovers, in stages, herself and through that her voice. She must by choice become voiceless, invisible, and indistinguishable, adapting an American way of talking and walking. Straddling two cultures, Jasmine undertakes a journey that involves a physical, an emotional, and a strongly intellectual, awakening. From the illegal alien entry to the “day mummy” stage of her life, the voice that tells her story is fraught with questions, doubts and laconic rejection. Faced with the option of total silence within the regimental and studied maintenance of superficial rituals and cultural adherence in the Vadhera’s household, Jasmine chooses independence and self-reliance. In the American family, the Hays household, Jasmine’s rueful acceptance of the role of “day mummy” to
Duff, reflects on the anxieties that underlie an American working mother’s life. Wylie and Taylor accept her for who she is. This period in Jasmine’s life is the most restful and comforting. It is a phase of minute observations of complex inner deliberations on, and keen involvement in, her new environment. To Jasmine, growing accustomed to a world cause and effect sequences are essential links to a logical explanation of events. Jasmine’s inner monologues and silent reflections capture her deliberations on cultural differences and an immigrant woman’s emotional adherence to her traditional beliefs. There is a sympathetic nuance to her voice as she appraises the two cultures, Indian and American, and rejects the possibility of adopting either one, in isolation from the other, as the only area for an immigrant woman’s growth.

Jasmine and so many immigrants, contemplate on the ironies of exclusive “preservation”. She concludes from observing the Vadhera family’s total immersion in preserving the old ways of an Indian lifestyle. In contrast, the Hayes family confirms for Jasmine that in America nothing really lasts forever. Taylor doesn’t attempt to change her. Yet she changes, as other immigrants have done. The ironies of life, however, pursue Jasmine in the reappearance of the Sikh assassin, Sukhwinder, who had murdered her husband in India. Jasmine, reminded of her illegal status, cannot call the police or seek justice,
even as she could not in an earlier instance when Half-Face had raped her. She again becomes “voiceless” and seeks sanctuary away from New York in Iowa.

Appearing self-possessed and patent, Jane, as we discover her through her interior monologues, is seething. Likening herself to a “tornado” she wonders about the changes that are yet to reshape her destiny. Baden, Iowa, offers her Bud’s desperation or Darrel’s self-pity – a place where Jane realizes she will be lonely regardless of Bud’s presence or absence. The very land, America, that had taught her to become the “speaking person” could close her up and make her feel “millennia old”. In “telling her tale”, the Jane and Jasmine selves of the protagonist seek to blend their “wants” and “dreams” into possibilities and realities. The range and texture of the narrative voice reiterate the immigrant woman’s personal journey as a new questioning pioneer’s movement from self-denial to self-realization. Tonal shifts and choice of metaphors invest the telling of the three stages of Jasmine’s evolution with a language that operates at various levels of meaning and creates its own resonance.

The narrative voice of the protagonist, speaking in the first-person point of view, reflects her choice of rhetorical tools in telling her tale. It is a legitimate point which needs illustration. In many ways the unevenness of voice in Jasmine reflects the precarious nature of her identity and existence. Living on
the edge, on the “margins” as it were, Jasmine plunges into the same unsafe expanses with almost a heady assurance. At the same time, it is strained and unbelievable as Jane voice, as is revealed when she compares herself to Charlotte Bronte Jane Eyre. Jasmine transcends these limitations through the richness of tonal variations that compound the building tempo of the novel.

The memory of Jasmine’s personal history and environment shapes and directs the reception of her present experiences and context and is often countered by the accruing of new memories of newer experiences. This double perspective of the shifts in time and space and their impact on the psyche of the immigrant woman can be explored through the tonal shifts with which the Jasmine-Jane protagonist concertize her emotional and intellectual reality. Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour, as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the underlined median between the preservation of the Old World and the assimilation into the new one. Painful recollections of the past find a necessary sheathing in a voice that delivers facts in the objective tone of reportage – as, for instance, when she recalls the murder of her husband with journalistic detachment. As the Jasmine – Jane protagonist learns to cast herself in different roles, she finds her initial identity in America immuned in the volitional silence and invisibility of law breakers in two senses. She is an illegal alien who has defied the
immigration laws and a murderer who defies the ruthless violence of a male-powered capitalist society. An adept at defiance as a mode of survival from her childhood days, Jasmine – Jane characterizes her voice with the tone of defiance. This defiance, born of inner monologues and reflections, and of the sanity and the capacity of the human will to survive, is distinct. It is at times a brash willful defiance, at others, a quietly enduring one.

This process of transformation, figuratively centered in the death of one’s old self and the birth of a new self, is a motif that vitalizes the narrative language and structure. Sensory images reiterate at various levels the symbolism of cyclical patterns of birth, death, and new birth, in the context of the post colonial immigrant woman’s life and experiences.

Another striking pattern of opposing images that emphasizes the nature of self-transformation in Jasmine recurs in the form of associations: death and violence associated with the stench of a floating carcass of a drowned dog, Pitaji’s sudden end, attacked by a bull from behind, or with the monstrous Half-Face, covered in the blood pouring from Jasmine’s slit tongue. Life and preservation are associated with the sweet smelling sandalwood Ganpati, the Hindu God who removes obstacles, and the red-tongued Jasmine as Kali-figure. While the animal images symbolize the violence and disorder that an external world can impose on an individual, the god/goddess images symbolize the
icons of the woman’s inner strength to be her own guide and savior. Partaking
the strength of both the male and the female aspects of the Godhead, Jasmine
realizes the end heterogeneous nature of human will and courage.

Jasmine – Jane, in realizing her potential as a “speaking person” and
“teller of tales”, creates the new voice and vision of the immigrant woman
defining her “changing into” and “transforming of” the world around her. She
adapts the oral method of transmitting knowledge and wisdom through short,
insightful self-created proverbs, enlivened by brutal honesty and biting candor.
Commenting on post colonial women writers, Ketu H. Katrak elucidates on their
“ongoing process of declining culture” which is relevant for postcolonial
immigrant writers like Bharati Mukhjeree as well:

Women writers’ uses of oral traditions and their revisions of Western
literary forms are integrally and dialectically related to the kinds of content
and themes they treat … Their texts deal with an often challenge… patriarchy
that preceded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the concept
of womanhood, motherhood...

Mukherjee indicates the complex blending of traditional and modern
forces in Jasmine through the narrator’s reinvention of the traditional proverb-
telling method of folk speech. Mukherjee in an interview points out this aspect
of her technique: “As a Hindu, I was brought up on oral tradition and epic literature .... I believe in the existence of alternative realities, and this belief makes itself evident in my fiction”. The Jasmine – Jane narrator – protagonist voices her transformations at multiple levels of self-identity as an “illegal”, an “immigrant”, a “woman” from the Third World. It is as if constant living on the borders has given Jasmine/Jane’s tongue an edge that challenges the possibility of “unvoicing” her experience. From the communal – centered value of telling truths through proverbs, the narrator-protagonist wrests and creates the new voice of her “speaking” and “telling” self. Her defiance is at the root of her inflexible energy to create her space in the borderland.

Jasmine-Jane, the immigrant woman, is the new pioneer who uses language to confront and challenge this characterizing of self through mainstream America’s rhetoric of “other”. She uses her language to control and direct her choice. Knowing what she does not want to turn into. Jasmine-Jane retains those values of her Hindu heritage that sustain her life in America – a strong faith in the importance of all individual life. She concretizes the concepts of Hindu dharma and karma in life. Her beliefs strengthen her ability to survive and to open herself to change. Mukherjee effectively poses this immigrant woman’s identity.
The novelist’s culture collection reaches its climax in her latest novel *The Holder of the World*. It is becoming more and more refined. The novel opens with the wonders possible through communication. It will enable Beigh Masters, a young American woman, to “live in three times’ zones simultaneously.” Her friend Venn Iyer establishes a grid, a database, which will enable them to work on interaction with a personality.

Beigh Masters assumes the role of ‘culture purveyor’ and is out to recreate the history of Hannah ‘the Salem Bibi’ belonging to the Seventeenth Century. She visits the Museum of Maritime Art and is fascinated with the paintings of Hannah. She learns about the existence of a diamond known as “the Emperor’s tear” and as an asset hunter undertakes a journey to India in order to discover the story behind the gem. The paintings in the museum, though interesting, are passive and indifferent. However, they are an active testimony of a living moment and Beigh Masters with the help of computer technology wants to cross culture and time so that she can place her data in its original and authentic cultural context.

Bharati Mukjherree changes the ground of her tale. The novel is not the story of an Indian immigrant to America struggling to establish identity in the dream country. It is the story of the encounter between two American women belonging to different centuries in India. The novelist turns the tale as an asset
which she uses to find value and space in the literary market and prove herself as one of the foremost American writers.

The novelist’s literary skills, her remarkable art of story-telling, her clarity, tenderness and humour make her a good writer.

To sell her product Bharati Mukherjee packages her work by using superficial myths and traditions and distorting her own cultural values. She mocks at the traditional values and suggests American consumer culture as a better alternative and therefore even though her novels deal with the struggle of immigrants they also celebrate their success in the dreamland. If a middle-class Bengali girl and a village simpleton like Jasmine can Americanize themselves why cannot they? And naturally her novels find market in India and in the West too.

Very few writers working on Indian theme and background have experimented with the new genre which has become very important, particularly in the hands of a few American and Commonwealth novelists. This literary form has now come to be known as the non-fiction novel in which the novelist/narrator adopts altogether a new technique.

While standing close to the art of a journalist, and yet differing from the function and method of a journalist, the writer of this form make use of an
altogether new mode of expression. This technique enables the writer to occupy
a privileged position and write in the first person while cutting away sharply
from the usually known literary forms like autobiography, travelogue, travel
fiction, confessional and journalistic writing. Though in many respects, the
writer appears to function as a journalist, he is neither given the position of a
journalist nor does he wish to function as a journalist.

The most outstanding feature of this technique is what may be called as
the expression of the filtered truth; the writer usually describes things in a
journalistic manner but at the most important moment the artist grips the
occasion to express his deep realization which takes the form of universal truth.
It is this deposition of universal truth that gives a deep philosophical touch to
the entire work.

Another important feature of the non-fiction novel is its dependence on
the reaction of the memory. While narrating his experience, the writer is seen
to recreate his memory by linking the same to wider visions and experiences
which almost appear to faction. Thus the mind of the artist here is caught in
mid-vision and then these are replaced by others, as a result of which the entire
writing appears to be based on a kind of knowledge.
In this context, it may be noted that the writers who attempt this kind of art form, are always seen keeping off the central point; not that they don’t have a central point but actually they are involved in a split attention that keeps them at a remove and yet intellectually their minds are throwing light on the central point from different angles.

This kind of technique which is at once different from journalistic art can very well be described as inchoate and becomes so effective that it projects some of the very significant writers of the Commonwealth literature.

When we come to analyse Bharati Mukherjee’s latest non-fictional novel Days and Nights in Calcutta we find an altogether new kind of literary work in which the author is functioning as a reporter, a traveler, a writer with a mood to confess, and yet the author ultimately transcended all such art to emerge finally as an artist of non-fiction novel. It is the technique or the art of driving away from the centre with the profound intensity of recreating memory and experience that makes this work so remarkable.

Both Clark Blaise and Bharati Mukherjee visit India after a long lapse of time and, to their surprise, they find little change in the social life and style of living of the people of Calcutta. As Clark settles down first in Calcutta, in the
absence of his wife, he is amazed to find all kinds of contradictions existing in the land known as India.

We discover the real style of the artist who explores the technique of pulling things together while he keeps off the center. Another startling technique is the numerous surprises that he throws up in course of his investigation.

Turning to part – II of the novel which is written by Bharati Mukherjee, we find that her first aim is to record her experiences of Calcutta precisely in the form of art. But her observations on India in general and Calcutta in particular appear different from those of Clark Blaise who is a French man and who sees India as a foreigner. Hence, the voice of Clark is completely different; he is frank, an extrovert who is ready to be impressed by anything that appears remarkable in India whereas the voice of Bharati strikes a different note; she is close and appears more an examiner and investigator of the facts in India.

REFERENCES