

時空を越えて再構築されるアイデンティティ： ムカジの“Orbiting”再読

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Re-construction of Identity beyond Time and Space:
Re-reading of “Orbiting” by Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

The article puts forward arguments why Bharati Mukherjee’s stories should be re-read and re-interpreted in the present. It also describes the literary critical reading of “Orbiting,” a short story written by Mukherjee with its intuitive interpretation.

Keywords: mobility, diaspora, identity, immigrants, refugees

0. Introduction

The New York Times Book Review¹ has introduced Bharati Mukherjee’s collection of short stories, *The Middleman and Other Stories*, as “a consummated romance with the American language, as “the same rapturous affection and acuteness of ear that Nabokov, another immigrant, brought to the idiom of America in the 1950’s in *Lolita*.”

Mukherjee is an immigrant writer of Bengali origin in the US. She was born into an Indian family of the most elite caste level, Bengali Brahmin in 1940. With the Indian heritage that gave her such privilege, Mukherjee was educated as a proper Indian girl of good family. She spoke Bengali her first three years, then entered English schools in Britain and Switzerland following her father. After she returned to India, she entered the Loretto School run by Irish nuns. Not until she

¹ *The New York Times* on the web, June 19, 1988, Sunday, Sec.7 p.1

was in graduate school in the US did Mukherjee recuperate some of the Hindu culture she had known as a child (KOIKE 2005).

Vladimir Nabokov is an exile writer from Russia. He was born into an old aristocratic family in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1899. His father was a leader of the pre-Revolutionary liberal Constitutional Democratic Party. After the 1917 and the Bolshevik Revolutions, his family was forced to leave the country. They settled in England and then in Berlin. They moved to the US in 1940 and completed *Lolita* in 1955. Coincidentally, my thesis was on *Lolita* by Nabokov and my dissertation was on Mukherjee's novels. The way of their writing can be also called “a romance with America itself, its infinitely possible geography, its license, sexiness and violence” due to their experiences in the US.

The above has been also demonstrated in a collection of essays titled, *writers on america*, published in the fall of 2002, one year after 9.11, by the United States Department of State. This book is reasonably exceptional; for it was published only for the readers outside of the US, in which most of the writers actually are immigrants themselves. Mukherjee is one of them, contributing an essay titled “On Being an American Writer” to the collection. Mukherjee claims that she should be an American writer, affiliating herself with the idea that America embraces all the people of the world: immigrants from all over the world.

In modern American fiction, the immigrant has classically been Jewish: Jewish writers, from Abraham Cahan through Henry Roth to Malamud himself, have reworked the facts of their history into a rich body of literary mythology. (*The New York Times*)

Immigrants are deeply related to the terms “Diaspora” and “mobility.” I would like to take a closer view of the term “mobility,”² which is the main theme of the symposium. It is defined as the ability to move easily from one place; social class, or job to another. It connotes agility in this sense; in other words liberating from all the attachments moving beyond time and space. (emphasis added)

The meaning of “Diaspora” has recently been extended to include the lives of any group living in displacement. There is now a vast assortment of writing about diasporas for us to consider. The US is a country of cultural hybrids who bring together dissimilar literary traditions, genres, and modes. Immigrant writers, therefore, have been playing a significant role in uniting the dots and making the

² “Mobility” and North American Literature/Culture was a symposium held by Nagoya University. “Mobility” is its key term.

lines into America. In my reading a text from what is known as the South Asian diaspora, two ideas, mobility as the condition of the present and future America and double consciousness as the cultural logic of those who take part in a diaspora, will be subjected to close study. This paper explores a short story, “Orbiting” by Mukherjee, an immigrant writer from India. The story is originally included in her own collection, *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) and later in *Braided Lives: An Anthology of Multicultural American Writing* (1991). This means that “Orbiting” is a story classified especially as an “interweaved” story amongst *The Middleman and Other Stories*. In Mukherjee’s words, “her intention” is disturbing what came before and “her mission” is exploring new worlds. In order to find a new meaning embedded in the story, I would like to discuss here a reconstruction of immigrant identities in multiculturalism.

The question which arises here is whether Mukherjee’s perspective can be a starting point of discussion about due to a 3-decade-gap of years. Most of you may assume that the story cannot be applied to review the current mobility in the US. Actually it can be a vivid reflection in the present.³ In this paper, my interpretation of the story will be discussed, focusing on the point how amazingly Mukherjee has created a state of “mobility” in her works beyond time and space.

1. New Americans

Before interpreting the story “Orbiting,” I would like to examine the collection of short stories compared with the former collection of short stories, *Darkness*. *Darkness* is said to have been mainly written on the mental condition of Mukherjee in Canada. Each of the stories in *the Middleman* has more spaciouly and socially included; the immigrants from Vietnam, the Caribbean, the Levant, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Italy and Sri Lanka besides India. The readers may feel immigrants in *the Middleman* moving quicker in pace than those in *Darkness*. Mukherjee’s protagonists in the *Middleman* are far from those in *Darkness* and appear not to be tortured by conscience.

“Orbiting” is a story set in a typical American cultural situation, “Thanksgiving” to dismantle a fixed concept regarding what constitutes “Americanness” so that Mukherjee can show us a positive production, a more inclusive model of multiculturalism and citizenship. Renata’s, a female protagonist; her family come over to her apartment for Thanksgiving dinner and meet her new boyfriend.

³ Back in the 1980s, when *the Middleman* was published, due to the Soviet-Afghan war, the US accepted a number of refugees from Afghanistan; and in 2016, an American who was born in Afghanistan exploded the bombs.

She attempts to bring her Italian-American family together with her Afghan lover. “All over the country, I tell myself, women are towing new lovers home to meet their families (63).” Renata in this way thinks that Thanksgiving is one of dull and ordinary situations in the US.

Through Mukherjee’s vision, her readers come across a new type of “American” family. Renata herself is not an immigrant, nor is her father who is proud of his “North Italian Way (58).” Her grandfather, “Arturo DeMarco, was a fifteen-week-old fetus when his mother planted her feet on Ellis Island (58).” Her father married “a Calabrian (located in South Italy) peasant (58)”, which is “one big adventure in his life.” They live in New Jersey, talk about sports, kids listen to Walkman. They are a typical American family.

As a result of the clash of cultural standards, Renata sees Italian culture as having been mixed or surrendered to American standards; such as Renata and Carla become “Rindy and Cindi in junior high (59)”. Instead, she considers Afghan culture as providing vitality, strength and shape. In other words, she regards her father and her brother-in-law as “children” and her Afghan lover as “Clint Eastwood, scarred hero and survivor (75)” who embodies American authentic values as they existed before the failure of the American Dream.

Ro, her lover, is a refugee and “must orbit one international airport to another (73),” from one transit lounge to another, in “Colombo, Seoul, Bombay, Geneva, Frankfurt (73),” until he can obtain forged papers. Though he cannot return to his home, he takes his home values with him and keeps them undamaged; however he is given a new identity after arriving in the US as an American.

2. New America

Generally speaking, it is natural that immigrants experience cultural and spiritual displacement. Ro experiences racial devaluation and restrictive harassment even by his girlfriend and her family. Rindy thinks “when I’m with Ro I feel I am looking at America through the wrong end of a telescope. He makes it sound like a police state, with sudden raids, papers, detention centers, deportations, and torture and death waiting in the wings (66).”

Although Mukherjee is fascinated by immigrant life, she always links their lives with transformation in both ways, into Americans as well as transformation into new America by immigrants. They need to have transformable identities, or flexible attitudes, which I explored in my dissertation.⁴ Simply what is “America-

⁴ See *Transformable Identity: The Meaning of Naming, Renaming, and Initials in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee*.

ness” and/or “American” is the main theme of the story just as Mukherjee herself has experienced in the US. Then the story is said to be her conclusion of a lifetime passage in compound ways. As Carchidi⁵ indicates, “Orbiting” disseminates the idea that intimate contacts with Americans are the best way for immigrants to integrate in the USA and that an intercultural marriage is the best way to enrich national culture. Renata would like to marry Ro, so that he could legalize his residence in the US.

Mukherjee’s way of illustrating multiculturalism is not always mosaic: it is often compartmentalized or segregated, and shows national identity as forged through difference. As shown in the story, multiculturalism must be “instead of melting and blending but sticking out in the Afghan way (74-75).” According to Mukherjee, “a true American is not a person who has lived in the USA for a long time, but a citizen who undergoes transformation and actively influences the surrounding reality (Drake, 71).”

Mukherjee exhibits that real multiculturalism is constructed by situations developing within changing, transforming and orbiting; that is, being in mobility. In short, mobility itself represents America-ness. Such an example of endlessly changing, energetic and dynamic elements appears to be offered us in “Orbiting.” Mukherjee attempts to portray the transformation of the US by immigrants, which I have explored in my dissertation. By the clash of Asian culture and American culture, Mukherjee shows the readers that the traditional American identity should be irreversibly transformed by the energy of newcomers, who seem to be pioneers just as original pioneers as in Willa Cather’s saying outlaws who “have squandered their lives in other lands”. One of these outlaws is Ro, Renata’s Afghanistan boyfriend who is running away from being arrested for political activities. He came to the US only with an Afghan dagger and a praying rug. Their encounter is needed to confirm Mukherjee’s way of multiculturalism to enrich the American society.

3. Conclusion

“Orbiting” has been re-collected in *Braided Lives*. This is quite meaningful. The title of a collection arouses an image of the interweaving of diverse viewpoints to create a new vision; not simply dichotomy of similar nor different, more like a transaction of meaning. I mean, the national and ideological significance of the story to demonstrate that the narrative of diaspora offers a challenge to the

⁵ V. Carchidi, *Orbiting: Bharati Mukherjee’s Kaleidoscope Vision*, “MELUS” 20 (1995) 4, p.97

dominant paradigms of American multiculturalism through their implicit call for more fluid or provisional frameworks for the construction of cultural and national identities.

Interestingly, there is another collection, “ME, MY HAIR, AND I--- Twenty-seven Women Untangle an Obsession. (2015)” Mukherjee has contributed her essay, “Romance and Ritual.” As an Indian girl her hair was taken good care of by her mother; but now she has been living more years in the US and wearing a wig. She has been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, and the medications she has been put on list “loss of hair” as a likely side effect. Her good friend, Amy Tan sent her a wig which will have to be cut and styled to suit her. This episode she is sharing in this essay illustrates her vision of being American.

Notes

*This paper is a thoroughly revised version of my presentation given at the International Symposium “‘Mobility’ and North American Literature/Culture” organized by Nagoya University and Chukyo University on March 20 and 21, 2016. This paper is dedicated to Bharati Mukherjee, who passed away on January 28, 2017.

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