

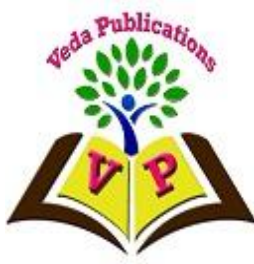
## THE USE OF IRONY IN THE SHORT STORIES OF BHARATHI MUKHERJEE, “DARKNESS”, “THE MIDDLEMAN AND OTHER STORIES”

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### ABSTRACT



Irony plays an important role in constituting a successful short story. The short story writer uses irony to suggest the complexity of experiences, to furnish indirectly an evaluation of his material and at the same time to achieve compassion. The three types of irony, which are normally used by the short story writers, are the verbal irony, Dramatic irony, and situational irony. The verbal irony, the simplest and the least important for a short story writer, is a figure of speech in which the opposite of what is intended is said, I.e., when a person says one thing he obviously means the opposite. Situational irony is usually the most important kind for the short story writer, in which he shows the discrepancy between appearance and reality, or expectation and fulfillment or which is and what would seem appropriate. In Dramatic irony, the contrast refers to between what a character says and what the reader knows to be true. The value of this kind of irony lies in the comment it implies on the speaker or his expectations. Bharathi Mukherjee in her two volumes of short stories, “Darkness”, “The Middleman and other stories”, she presents these three ironies in a more sarcastic and biting way.

**Keywords:** *Bharathi Mukherjee, Verbal Irony, Dramatic Irony, Situational Irony.*

## INTRODUCTION

The irony employed by Bharati Mukherjee is more disgusting and powerful. In the two volumes of short stories “Darkness” and “The Middleman and other stories”, Mukherjee employs sarcastic and biting irony to present the life of immigrants in America, Canada, and other countries. In her introduction to *Darkness* she confesses that,

“I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation. Like Naipaul, I used a mordant and self-protective irony in describing my characters’ pain. Irony promised both detachment from and superiority over, those well-bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong, anywhere.”<sup>1</sup>

In the story “A Lady from Lucknow” Mukherjee employs the biting irony to describe the character of Nafeeza Hafeez. She is very much influenced by the story of a Muslim neighbouring girl, who falls in love with a Hindu boy and unfortunately, her father intercepts a love note from the boy. In a fit of anger he beats her to death. She listens this from her mother, who describes how the girl is killed by her father and develops a kind of rebel against the traditions.

Mukherjee develops the theme of passionate love into a major cultural paradox as the Muslim protagonist matures into a young woman, who is married to an engineer-manager in IBM at Atlanta. Mukherjee through this story presents ironically the double –edged situation of the immigrants in America, one on the cultural, ethical level and the other on the personal, moral level.

Nafeeza in confusion and puzzled by the punishment given to Hussenia develops an adventurous relationship with Dr. James Beamish, an elderly-65-year-old-White American intellectual. The story conveys the juxtaposition of repressive cultural orthodoxy and permissive cultural heterodoxy. As A.V.Krishna Rao rightly comments

“Mukherjee’s use of irony is indeed tellingly effective. At personal and familial level, it is ironical that the Muslim family which moved to Ravalpindi from Lucknow...should fails to preserve its cherished communal value system under the impact of an alien culture. In addition, the ironical detachment of Mukherjee is so complete that it enables her to provide the full opportunity for the character to grow and reach its limit naturally.”<sup>2</sup>

Nafeeza’s lust and love for Dr. Bheamish reaches the climax when the doctor’s wife catches them both red-handed. She even sheds all fear and shame even when humiliated by the middle-aged wife of the doctor. Mrs. Beamish sends her away to her dock house. The irony is that whatever has started as a revenge on tradition and culture by Nafeeza ends up as personal vengeance.

In the stories “The World According to Hsu”, “A Father” “ Isolated Incidents”, “Tamurlane”, “Visitors” also Mukherjee employs biting irony. In the story “A Father” she directs at immigrant Indians, who sufficiently acultured but fail to assimilate fully in the host country. Mr. Bhowmick’s daughter Babli wants to have a baby through artificial insemination outside wedlock at the age of twenty seven, because she hates men, and she has no faith in the traditional marriage system. The irony is that the Bhowmicks, who do not have any idea of their daughter’s intention, want to marry their daughter to a progressive American. But when they come to know of the truth they are unable to digest it. They want to know the name of the boy so that they can get him married to their daughter, but when Babli tells them that the father of her baby is not a man but a bottle and a syringe, they are shocked. The mother cried out ‘like animals’ which annoys Babli and she screams,

“ “Yes, yes, yes,” she screamed,” like livestock. Just like animals. You should be happy- that’s what marriage is all about, isn’t? Matching bloodlines, matching horoscopes, matching castes, matching, matching, matching....” and it was difficult to know if she was laughing or singing, or mocking and like a madwoman.”<sup>3</sup>

The story ends on ironic note, Babli who aspires to have a baby without marriage gets aborted when her father throws rolling pin on her stomach. The Bhowmicks dream of marrying their daughter to a prosperous American is also shattered by the decision of Babli. Mukherjee through this story wants to uncover the paradoxical situation of the Asian immigrants who are caught up between two cultures, the adopted and the native. They neither accept the adopted culture nor reject the native.

In the second volume of the short stories *The Middleman* and other stories also Mukherjee uses mordant and self provocative irony in almost all the stories. In three of the stories, “ A Wife’s story”, “ The Tenant”, and “ Jasmine” Mukherjee concludes that it is ironically impossible for any Indian to adapt to life in the New world without sustaining some kind of wound to one’s self. The three women, Maya Sanyal, Panna Butt, and Jasmine struggle to establish their identity in the New World. Their struggle is both exhilarating and debilitating. As Arvindra Sant-wade comments,

“The irony is that this refashioning of the self is both painful and exhilarating; hence, the terrible ambivalence of the women toward their own freedom – the freedom to become – an ambivalamnc4 expressed by these women in the midst of arduous change, in the powerful act of rejecting the pas and moving energetically towards an unknown future”.<sup>4</sup>

Mukherjee's own comment on this double edged situation of protagonists in alien nation reads as,

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. 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. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic.<sup>5</sup>

The irony is that they take such risk in their new adapted worlds which they would not have taken in their own comfortable countries.

The story, "A Wife's story" depicts the ironical struggle of establishing one's self in the adopted land. Mukherjee presents the contrast between Panna's adaptability and Mamet's mental blocks in an ironical juxtaposition. In the very beginning of the story Mukherjee presents the ironical situation of Indian women in America. Panna is irritated and gets angry over the play and the terrible line in the play about Indians. She feels angry enough to write a letter to the play writer in protest. Though Panna protests against the criticism of the Americans on Indians she also adapts herself to their behaviour. She also notices how much she has changed when her husband comes to visit her. In America she feels free and wears the costumes of the adapted land. But she has to change into the traditional Indian dress, the sari when her husband visits her. She recalls with a tinge of irony that when she was in India she had to know only about the taste of her husband. She was not given any importance, but when she has come to America she has got full freedom. She resents the Indian traditional marriage system in which there is no scope for love and affection and the wife has no liberty to call her husband by name. But when her husband informs her of his arrival she again changes her dress into that of a traditional Indian woman. "I change out of the cotton pants and shirt I've been wearing all day and out on a sari to meet my husband at JKF. I don't forget the jewelry; the marriage necklace of mangalsutra, gold drops earrings heavy gold bangles. I don't wear them every day. In this borough of vice and greed, who knows when, or whom, desire will overwhelm."<sup>6</sup>

Though she is dressed according to the wish of her husband, she is blamed for not wearing his mother's ring. Even during their tour in New York City, Mukherjee presents with incisive irony the contrast between the wife's adaptability and the husband's rigid mentality. He grumbles at the behaviour of a Lebanese at the counter and the informality of the guide. He is also suspicious of the Yugoslav, who helps his wife to take photos. She is so vexed with her husband that at the end of the story, when her husband requests her to come with him to India she bluntly refuses that she cannot go with him leaving her Ph.D. Degree in the middle. But the irony is that she cannot use that degree in India as she is not allowed to

go out to do job in India, so she simply pretends that nothing has changed. But in her heart of hearts she does not want to go back to India again.

In the story, "The Tenant" also Mukherjee presents the ironical struggle to rehabilitate in America. The protagonist is Maya Sanyal, a tutor in the department of English at the University of Northern Iowa. She left India to try her best in America as she believes 'a person has to leave home, Try out his wings. But the irony is that she only knows only to take but doesn't give as she cannot establish good relationships with others, as she does nothing. She has accomplished nothing. She has changed her citizenship but she hasn't broken though into the light, the vigor, the bustle of the New World. She is stuck in dead space. Her situation in America is just like that of 'Trishanku' she is truck between the native country and the adapted. She fails to rehabilitate herself in the new culture, as she has broken the marriage with John, a student. It is only the beginning; she even fails to establish relationship with the land owner and with Dr. Chatterjee, another Indian professor and then Ashoke Mehta. The depiction of Chatterjee and his family is also ironical. Dr. Chatterjee, a traditional Brahmin knows everything about Maya and wants to take advantage of her position. So Maya wants to avoid him quickly. Her unpleasant situation in America is that of a trapeze artist as she has left the stability of a traditional culture and trying her best to rehabilitate herself in the new culture. But the irony is that, she occupies an ambiguous position in American community. Though she has become an American citizen, she does not fully belong here either, because she longs for a real companionship and love. So she goes to the library and searches in the matrimonial column. But the irony is that when the opportunity comes to her to marry Ashoke Mehtha, she rejects the proposal confessing her guilty life behind her. She decides to settle down with Fred, an armless man but inertly she expects a call from Ashoke Mehta. She is not sure whether her relationship with Ashoke would continue. The irony is that a tenant is always a tenant in an alien nation. So also is the condition of Jasmine in the story "Jasmine".

Mukherjee is equally efficient in depicting the ironical situations of the American counterparts in her stories. The stories "Loose Ends", "Orbiting", "Fathering" depict the ironical situations of the male counterparts in establishing relationships with their migrant counterpart. In the story "Fathering", also Mukherjee deals with the impact of Vietnam War on the life of an American Vietnam Veteran, who is divided in between his present American life and his past Vietnam life in a biting irony.

## CONCLUSION

Thus the use of irony by Mukherjee is more disgusting and powerful. In her two volumes of stories she uses sarcastic and biting irony to depict her themes of expatriation, immigration and assimilation. As she confesses in one of her interviews, she uses the self-protective and mordant irony to explore the pain and agony of the state-of-the-art of expatriation. In some stories she uses situational irony to depict the double-edged situation of the immigrants in America and Canada. She uses biting irony to explore how the Asian immigrants particularly Indians, suffer to acculturate and assimilate fully in the host country.

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