

Cultural Shock: A Major Issue in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels

P. Rajeswari and Dr. K. Balamurugan

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer whose preoccupation is dealing with the problems and issues related to South Asian Women, particularly India, though she claims that her feelings are more like those of the women of North America. She differs from other writers in the way she deals with her heroines (Indian women immigrants), predominantly with their cultural shock that overthrows them in life directly or indirectly. This is illustrated very clearly by Tara Banerjee in 'The Tiger's Daughter', Dimple in 'Wife', Jyoti in 'Jasmine' and Devi in 'Leave it to me', three sisters - Padma, Parvathi and Tara in 'Desirable Daughters' and Tara in 'The Tree Bride'. Though the heroines are described as bold and assertive, they do not escape from this particular behavior born of 'culture shock'. They have the strong potentiality for adaptability; they stand on firm ground to change their lives really, if necessary, and/or accept the bitter truth of their lives anyhow. This paper tries to capture the main reason, the quintessential concept behind the dilemma of all the heroines of her novels.

Keywords: South Asian Women, Cultural shock, Women immigrants, Feminist writer

Introduction – A New Kind of Pioneer

The Indian born (Bengali) writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the popular Indian writers in English from America. The immigrant writers are of two categories. First come the "Willing Immigrant Writers" who are settled in America from Europe and Asia and who have made it their home. The second category consists of the "Unwilling Immigrant Writers" (Banerjee 1993) of American origin whose forefathers were brought to America in some slave ships. But Bharati Mukherjee has gone on record saying that she considers herself an American writer, and not an Indian expatriate writer. In an 1989 interview with Amanda Meer, Mukherjee said: "I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America. I'm the first among Asian immigrants to be making this distinction between immigrant writing and expatriate

writing. Most Indian writers prior to this, have still thought of themselves as Indians, and their literary inspiration, has come from India. India has been the source, and home. Whereas I'm saying, those are wonderful roots, but now my roots are here and my emotions are here in North America."

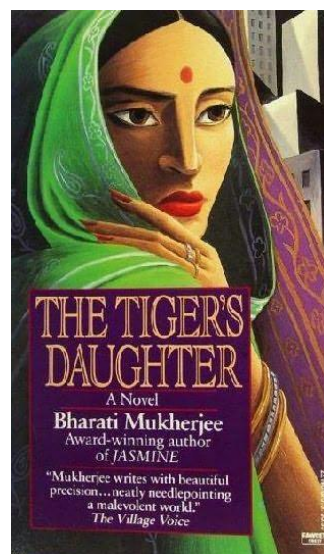
Bharati's Heroines and Their Role

Bharati's heroines, however, are immigrants and undergoing cultural shock, but they try to stand strong with their own identity or individuality. This may be the reason for Bharati Mukherjee to have had significant attention, getting both positive and negative criticism from all corners of the literary world. Though she claims that she writes of expatriates with the feeling of a North American, she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views. She portrays women characters as the victims of immigration, and yet actually the problems are not caused, because they are immigrants, but because the women characters fight for their rights as women and then as individuals just as the other feminist writers' heroines.

A Tantrum over Culture?

Our examination is to be searching for who the Mukherjee's characters are, especially, the heroines, whether or not they throw a tantrum over culture and its rules against the particular gender. She (Bharati Mukherjee) has always been trying to create her women as those who prepare themselves to be their own gravitational force, beyond the domination of patriarchy. Let us examine, the novels of Bharati Mukherjee based on this concept. (Banerjee, 1993)

The Tiger's Daughter



The Tiger's Daughter is the first novel by Bharati Mukherjee. The protagonist Tara Banerjee returns to India after a significant stay in the US. The story is of Mukherjee's own experience and might be of her siblings also, who had gone for study in America. When Tara

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lands at Bombay airport, she is not comfortable with her relatives as they are not in a position to accept a woman who is not accompanied by her husband, David.

According to Indian tradition, a woman should be led by her husband. He plays a protective role. Travelling alone, living alone and moving alone are part of an unfamiliar terrain in many parts of India. In the Indian tradition, one should marry within his own caste. If anyone marries one from another caste, he/she will be treated as an outcast or a sinner. But the protagonist Tara, violating these rules, marries a foreign man who is a Jew. She totally forgets her caste and religion through her marriages. Ironically, Mukherjee criticizes the narrow-minded attitude of Indians who are crazy about foreign things and clothes, but do not approve of marriage with foreigners. In the presence of her mother, Tara feels alienated. Within herself, Tara becomes mentally disturbed and expedites her return to the USA. Thus, in the first novel one finds the feeling of alienation taking root in Tara.

Wife

In the Novel *Wife*, Dimple the protagonist, a typical young Bengali Girl who starts dreaming of modern life in America when she is to marry a guy – Amit Basu—who is about to settle in the US. Dimple feels that she has lost her identity in this marriage since her husband expects her to be a traditional Indian wife. Her mental agony goes unattended and untreated and finally she kills her husband and commits suicide. She resents being wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in many ways. One such way is the one including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from her pregnancy, which she views as Basu's property even in her womb. He needs her only for sexual indulgence. She feels it's some sort of guilty. (Banerjee, 1993)

Culture Shock

Here on track with the topic 'cultural shock', these two heroines of the novels reflect the psychic vibration called 'cultural shock'. It is to be noted that both heroines are typical Indians maybe in their minds, but tend to behave more in the western style. They struggle against these inner and outer feelings. Of course they succeed in their attempt, but it is only partial success, since both are not able to change themselves to be fully western. Dimple commits suicide and Tara becomes mentally disturbed. If they were typical western women, they would have behaved in a different manner. (Banerjee, 1993) Dimple would have gotten her divorce and Tara would have ridiculed the relatives instead of becoming mentally upset. All the heroines of Mukherjee, are of Indian roots one way or the other. It could be seen in her other novels *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and so on.

Jyoti in *Jasmine*

Jasmine, her third most read novel is the story of a Punjabi rural girl, Jyoti. Prakash, an energetic and enthusiastic young man enters into Jyoti's life as her husband. Jasmine is a typical Indian girl who gets along with Indian tradition and customs; accordingly she reacts when Prakash prepares to go to America, saying, "I'll go with you and if you leave me, I'll jump into a well". A woman has to accept, the path of her husband. Renamed as Jasmine, joyously sharing the ambition of her husband, she looks forward to going to America, a land of opportunities, but this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure. (Dayal, 1993) She decides to go America and fulfill Prakash's mission and perform "Sati". Having learned to "Walk and Talk" like an American, she grabs every opportunity to become American. In the end she kills Sukhawinder, the Khalsa lion who killed Prakash. After that she goes to Iowa assuming a new name "Jase". (Dayal, 1993) There are myriad roles played by Jasmine as Jase, and Jase abuses the power of a woman. This power could be colossal, which should have been channelized to destroy evil and fight against all ills of mankind. Jasmine has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. She has learnt to live not for her husband, nor for her children but for herself. Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter and an adaptor. She fights against unfavorable circumstances, comes out a winner and carves out a new life in an alien country.

The Holder of the World

Bharati Mukherjee's succeeding novel *The Holder of the World* symbolizes expatriation as a Journey of the human mind. Like Jasmine who travels westward, Hannah Estean's 'Voyage to the Orient' tells us about the protagonist's latest tensions, aspirations and ambitions. Hannah is born in Massachusetts and she travels to India. She becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king who gives her a diamond known as true 'Emperor's Tear'. The story is told to the detectives searching for the diamond from Hannah's view point. The physical journey of the female hero not only leads to probing of the self, but also makes her recognize a new side of herself. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American, but a rebel living on the fringes of society. In her next novel, 'Leave it to me', Bharati Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby Dimartino, short name Debi who seeks revenge on the parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents (described as a murderer and a flower child). The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional involvement of the chief character in her quest for revenge. (Pandya, 1990)

Conclusion

Women have experienced through marriage and/or travel abroad, tremendous physical and mental changes in their personal lives. Though they seem to be well suited for adaptability in an alien culture, the shock they go through initially is indispensable. The reason is they all are born Indian and brought up very much immersed in Indian traditions to feel and behave as custom demands, but at the same time they want to break out of it and live like western women,

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looking forward to it with a dreamy and tinted glass outlook. They speak of feminism and liberation easily, but stumble in living the same. This is what is found to be the main struggle in the lives of all of Mukherjee's ladies.

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P. Rajeswari, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar
Bharatiyar University
Coimbatore - 641 046
Tamilnadu
India
rajeswary18@gmail.com

Dr. K. Balamurugan, M.A, M.Phil., MBA, M.A. (ELT), PGCTE, PGDTM, B.LISc, Ph.D.
Bharatiyar College of Engineering & Technology
Karaikal 609 602
Pondicherry U T (Puducherry)
India
englishbala@gmail.com

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