

Bharati Mukherjee's Depiction of Expatriate Sensibility and Cross-cultural Encounters

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Abstract

This paper focuses on cross-cultural experiences through expatriation and the conflict arises in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee's Culture is the prime identity of human life. Her novels mainly focus on dislocation, alienation and assimilation in the alien land. Mukherjee's novel depicts the need for immigrants to choose their home and culture by constantly adjusting themselves to the newly adopted nation and by remaining in nostalgic state of being in their naïve land and shows how Mukherjee attempted to portray outsiders' lives in a sensible way. She tries to pen down cross-cultural conflicts in her novels and projects how her characters take control over their destiny.

Keywords: Bharati Mukherjee, Expatriation, cultural conflict, alienation, immigration, assimilation, self-identity.

The word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek "dia" meaning 'through' and 'sperien' meaning 'to scatter'. Webster's dictionary defines "diaspora" as 'dispersion'. So the very word embodies a notion of a centre, a 'home' from where the dispersion occurs involving images of multiple journeys so as to refer to its meaning as both "a spread of population' and 'a forcible dispersal" (Sireesha 9) Paradoxically, diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about having roots elsewhere. In the words of Telugu Sireesha,

"The concept of diaspora means different things to different people at different points of time, place and circumstance." (P. 9)

Today the meaning of diaspora could be limited to any sizeable community of a particular nation outside its own country, sharing some common ponds that give the community a consequent identity. Truly speaking, 'diaspora' is not a metaphor for individual exile. Rather, it emerges out of migration of people, whether they travel collectively or as individuals or as households or in various other combinations, often involving traumas of separation and dislocation, in a word, every important aspect of migratory experience.

‘Indian diaspora’ is one of sweat and toil often washed with tears, of achievements despite impediments, of educational advancement and economic progress, of political success at times etc. Indian immigrants form a large chunk of diaspora all over the world. The diasporic community has inevitably produced works of literature illustrative of their history and heritage, of their own awareness of the society and its problems, its achievements, its limitations and frustrations among others. In this context, the literature emerging from the diasporic people assumes significance and the literature of the Indian diaspora is nothing, but that body of writing produced in English by people who identify themselves as being of Indian heritage living outside their own land. The Indian diaspora has been formed by a scattering of population. By dividing in his essay “From Sugar to Masala” the Indian diaspora into two categories, Sudesh Mishra writes:

“This distinction is between, on the one hand, the semi-voluntary flight of indentured peasant to non-metropolitan plantation colonies such as Fiji, Trinidad, Mauritius, South Africa, Malaysia, Surinam and Guyanan, roughly between the years 1830 and 1917 and the other the late capital or post-modern dispersal of new migrants of all classes thriving metropolitan centres such as Australia, the United States, Canada and Britain.” (P. 276)

After Indian Independence, the Indian diasporic community has acquired a new identity due to the processes of self-fashioning and increasing acceptance by the west. What is interesting to note here is that the history of diasporic Indian writing is as old as the diaspora itself. Quite significantly the Diaspora in Indian writing in English covers’ every continent and part of the world. Now globalisation has produced new patterns of migration and provoked divergent responses worldwide. Different responses to migration, whether as an attendant phenomenon of globalization on a consequence of political persecution, ethnic cleansing or natural disasters are articulated in literature produced in places whether diasporic communities exist. With more and more writers of Indian origin settling abroad and enjoying themselves in creating writing in the countries of their domicile, the theoretical problem is that of the critical parameters by which their works have to be defined and assessed writers like A.K. Ramanujan, Agha Shahid Ali, David Dabydeen, M.G. VasANJI, Meena Alexander, Rohinton Mistry, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are a few of the names worthy of mention here as those who have projected diasporic experience/consciousness in their writings to a very great extent. In short, ‘Diaspora’ is a loaded term that brings to one’s mind various contested ideas and images and ‘diasporic literature’ has made a significant contribution to Indian writing in English by its rich exposure to multiculturalism.

Bharati Mukherjee is one among the notable diasporic writers who in her novels and short stories expresses the nomadic impulses of Indians who in their deliberate search for material gains migrate to the West and consequently face tensions of adaptations and

assimilation. As a novelist, she has clearly stated her aim in her novels thus: “my aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country” (Qtd in Inamdar 39). She has spent much of her career exploring issues involving immigration and identity with a particular focus on the United States and Canada. She was born on July 27, 1940 to wealthy parents, Sudhir Lal and Bina Mukherjee in Calcutta. By the age of ten, she knew that she would become a writer and as such, she had written good number of short stories. His education took place in Kolkatta, England and the USA. Taking graduation from the University of Calcutta in 1959, she got her M.A. degree in creative writing in 1963 from the University of Iowa. In the USA, she got her Ph.D. from the Department of English and Comparative Literature. During the course of her study at Iowa, she chanced to meet a young Canadian writer Clark Blaise and that blossomed into courtship with him leading finally to her marriage with him in 1963. Both writers continued to write independently and also produced by joint venture some non-fictional works. Taking up teaching career, she taught at McGill University in Montreal, at Marquett University, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Skidmore College, Montclair State College and Emory University. Then she with her partner moved to the USA from Canada where she found her true self. No doubt, she loved the USA for her respect for individual liberty, freedom of expression and the liberty to hold one’s own views. She wrote rather boldly that she would prefer to be called an American rather than a hyphenated diaspora.

As a well-renowned writer in delineating the Asian immigrant experiences in North America in many of her works, Bharati Mukherjee has focused on the different aspects of her personal life in an alien land and has spun the same experiences in her literary and cultural poetics. “She is not only the most commercially successful among women writers of the Indian Diaspora, but also the most controversial narrator of Indian cultural identity in a multi-cultural context” (Singh 110). Mukherjee is at her best in the depiction of cross-cultural conflicts and shows how her characters take control over their destinies. Though she draws her picture of the Indian life intelligible and interesting to the American readers through her novels, she is too good an artist to distort reality to capture attention. She avoids stereotyped versions and sentimental exaggerations and tries to pack into her novels a rich resonance of meaning by the deft device of combining immigrant, feminist and existentialistic perspectives thereby focusing her attention on the growing awareness of the dark spots in the lives of her characters and their courageous efforts to discover areas of light. This search for light, for happiness and fulfillment is subtly linked in her fiction to her protagonists’ struggle for self-actualization.

Bharati Mukherjee does not like to be called a feminist but she stands for women’s right to equality, freedom and independent identity. Tara dreams of peaceful Bengal of Satyajit Ray’s films but finds it shabby and people untrustworthy and uncultured in democratic values. Her stay in India makes her realize that despite the problems, expatriates face in America, it is far more suited for them than their homeland. She accepts her foreignness among her own people and the

country. In this respect, Mukherjee's very first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a journey of Tara from expatriate's sense of alienation to acceptance of the foreign land as her own homeland. This novel, it may be said, is nothing but a novel of single character as the story revolves round Tara and all other characters only serve the purpose of enhancing the central theme of expatriate sensibility. This novel is out and out a story about a young girl named Tara who ventures back to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee's own venture back to India with Clark Blaise in 1973 when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of India and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition.

As an Indian born American writer, Bharati Mukherjee is "a familiar voice in the Indian literary diaspora" (P 49). In her fiction, she does neatly depict the problems faced by Indians who attempt to assimilate into the North American lifestyles. *The Middlemen and other Stories* is a collection of short stories portraying a complete change in the majority of immigrant protagonists. They are seen as immigrants who have fully adapted themselves to American culture. The immigrants of these stories are from India, Italy, Hungary, Vietnam, Afghanistan etc. The author talks not only of Indians but also of the whole of immigrant experience, that too, about the immigrants from different parts of the world facing one major problem, Americanization. "A Wife's Story" is about a married Indian woman Panna, a Ph.D. scholar doing research in the USA. She is not happy with her Indian husband and her dominating mother-in-law and so she migrates abroad as an excuse from her in-laws. She is scared to think of Indian husbands who burn their wives for dowry:

"I've made it; I'm making something of my life. I've left home, my husband to get a Ph.D." (A Wife's Story 29)

Panna is seen as expatriate, struggling between two worlds or two values, one can see her playing a dual role when her husband visits New York:

"I change out of the cotton pants and shirt
I have been wearing all day and put on a sari
to meet my husband at JFK. I don't
forget the marriage necklace or mangalasutra,
gold drop 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" (A Wife's Story 33)

This transformation in Panna brings out the nostalgia she has for her land, India. The story reveals the marital life of Panna in the past to be both sick and disgusting for her husband

never went out with her in India for shopping. Only on coming to the United States, she has been recognized as a distinct person with her own identity. In fact, Panna is very happy to see her husband leaving for India and on the eve of his departure, she gets transformed into an obedient loving wife. Thus, the story ends on a note of freedom for an Indian Hindu wife in America. The story conveys that what is central to married life is the importance of compromise. The story “Tenant” pictures, the protagonist Maya Sanyal as an immigrant leading her life in the present without thinking of the past who marries an American and later gets divorced: “All Indian men are wife beaters” (Tenant 99). This brings out the emotional insecurity in Maya towards Indian men. Quite willing to enjoy and experience the freedom in her life with free association of men, she not only gives up the Indian way of life but also changes her food habits and other altitudes. This act of hers proves that immigrants need to sacrifice their own culture before getting changed into new persons and becoming one with a new culture. Mukherjee’s protagonists have to face severe and rigorous problems and suffering so as to realize the needs and experiences of a new world. Towards the end, Maya Sanyal is prepared to make love to a man without arms and her entire transformation from the time she entered America breaking away from her parents’ way of life to her association with Ashok Mehta, is a long journey of hurdles and of her search for love. Despite the love she wins, Maya feels the emptiness within her, a feeling of alienation. Bharati Mukherjee ends the story by picturizing the insecure living condition of liberated Indian women in America.

Bharati Mukherjee has dexterously exhibited her skill in depicting “characters who are exiles, immigrants or outsiders, characters caught on the margins between two cultures, between India and America, tradition and modernity, East and West” (Singh 109). In this age of globalization, exile is often considered a chosen condition accepted for the hope of a ‘better life’ and when people are disappointed in such condition, the pangs of remaining far from homeland are heart-breaking. Edward W. said observes that exile is “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; it’s essential sadness can never be surmounted” (P. 173). America tended to exert a stronger gravitational pull with her characters ardently embracing its freedom and whispered promise of change and transformation. In *Jasmine* Mukherjee relates both the odyssey and the metamorphosis with its shocking upheavals of a young immigrant from rural India.

Jasmine is a feminine Bildungsroman rewritten around the post-colonial and postmodern agenda. This novel focuses on Jasmine, an underage woman and as a widow to the United States where her fate will be ‘rewritten’. This is the novel that lays a focus on migration, identity and gender. *Jasmine* has inherited a tradition of exile and migration from her family. At the age of sixteen. She is planning to move with her old Indian and at seventeen, she becomes a widow. In her confusion, she decides to go to America to commit Sati, burning herself along with her husband’s suit. Her decision is in compliance with her old Indian dutifulness. *Jasmine* is a novel

that beautifully depicts the experiences of an expatriate in a multicultural society. *Jasmine* is a rebellious girl who rebels against traditional society of India. In short, the novel *Jasmine* develops the idea of the mixing of the East and the West with a story telling of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder, only to be raped and eventually returned to the position of a care giver through a series of jobs. The unity between the first and Third worlds is shown to be in the treatment of women as subordinate in both countries.

Wife is another novel dealing with the theme of expatriate's life in a foreign land. The protagonist of the novel is Dimple Dasgupta, an ambitious young woman who has an intense desire to go abroad and live a luxurious life. She marries Amit Basu whose mother Mrs. Basu quite traditional. She does not like her. She does not want pregnancy soon and wants to have life free from family problems and worries. Going with her husband to the USA and being enamoured with the luxurious life of the people in the USA. She tries to Americanize her life drinking beer and attending parties. Watching TV shows that show rapes, murders, sex and violence, she begins to dislike Amit for his crudeness. Suffering from Insomnia, she develops friendship with Ina Mullick and Milt Glasser and becomes more and more psychic. She constantly thinks and dreams of death. Finally, she thinks of killing Amit and hiding his body in the freezer. She mixes the fantasy of TV shows with real life. No doubt, she is a split personality suffering from neurosis, schizophrenia and death instinct. The theme of novel would be nothing but ambition lust, pressure of expatriate life and psychological disorder resulting from imbalance between fantasy and reality. The cycle of expatriation that Dimple undergoes gets her life fully collapsed. She is an immigrant being highly emotional patiently suffering from depression and psychic disorder. As Telugu Sireesha has put it, "Bharati Mukherjee is the only writer who challenges the translucent lives of immigrant women signified strong in their characters but always very emotional" (P 23). Her *Wife* does personify Dimple as "a psychoneurotic" before marriage whose problems get aggravated after her migration to the United States of America and she is depicted as the lone female protagonist among all the characters in Bharati Mukherjee's works who feels that she suffers a strong sense of insecurity being a woman.

Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* published in 1993 and *Leave it to Me* in 1997 lay focus equally on immigrant lives of characters. *The Holder of the World* is a beautifully written story about Hannah Easton, a woman born in Massachusetts who travels to India and becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king gives her a diamond known as the Emperor's Tear. The story is told through the defective searching for the diamond. Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals and she also uses the female characters to explore and spatiotemporal connection between cultures. *Leave It to Me* tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby Dimatino who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a revengeful search for her real parents. The novel

also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother daughter relationships through the political and emotional instincts by the main character in her quest for revenge. In the novel, *Jasmine*, the protagonist struggles to achieve herself in the society where she belongs and labours a desire for independence and a respect for success that appears incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty gender-discrimination and rigid social conventions. Jasmine's yearning for independence from her early childhood marks the beginning of the struggle for self-actualization. As a whole, the novel *Jasmine* deals with a young Indian widow's successful attempt to reshape her destiny and her happiness in an alien land.

Desirable Daughters is the story of three sisters, Tara, Parvati and Padma, born and raised in Calcutta in the 1950's and the different paths they travel from this nexus. Here in this novel, the creation of identity emerges as continuous process, forever transforming without an end. Tara is a savvy, cosmopolitan globe trotter having beauty, brain, wealth and a privileged life as the wife of a Silicon Valley magnate. After marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee, she arrives in America steeped in Indian culture exhibiting the behaviour of the pragmatic Indian wife. Back at home, she had led a sheltered life where she was inundated with culture, tradition and values though inculcated by the catholic nuns who were her teachers. Thus, when Tara reaches America, she feels the tug between the tradition and freedom allowed in the affluent American society. However, she immediately tries to embrace the American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can into the new society. Tara after much travelling finds that she is comprised of multiple selves accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and American culture. She comes to terms with the idea that she will never have a single identity but rather gets dispersed between being Indian and American. She no longer fights with her multiplicity but rather accepts it as part of her progressive capacity. The Sanskrit poem in the novel's foreword itself lays out Tara's mission:

“No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, everyone's path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way”.
(*Desirable Daughters* 104).

Unlike Jasmine, in Tara, there is no struggle between the emerging selves that caused Jasmine to remain always on the move and invent completely new identities. Instead of transplanting Indian culture or disposing it off altogether, she tries to assimilate her Indianness through reinventing her identity as experience for ever keep on moulding it into something new. In *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee explores a complicated working out of the relationship between home, identity and community that calls into question the notion of a coherent, historically continuous stable identity. In this novel, dangers lurk on all sides to attack families, marriage, peace of mind and the status. These hazards are born in family, the retaining of one's niche, the desire place for wealth, fate, human secrets and conspiracies. And paradoxically, the

only protection against these pitfalls are the hazards themselves: family, social position, wealth, secrets and the gods.

Desirable Daughters is, thus, a well-written novel which gives readers an insight into the Indian culture, but one wishes the author had delved further into what it means to be an Indian woman coming to enlightenment instead of falling into the trap of an imperialist American feminism which betrays the feminism of other cultures. Here in this novel, Bharati Mukherjee continues to explore once again the transformation an immigrant undergoes in leaving the physical, cultural and mental space that is the motherland for America. While the novel *Wife* depicts an Indian Woman's exile to America and her spoiling of her self-conscience, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* explore the shifting identities of diasporic women, both in the present-day United States, Canada and India in the past.

To conclude, Bharati Mukherjee's novels represent the contemporary woman's struggle to define herself and attain an autonomous selfhood, especially in cross-cultural crisis, a subject which has assumed a great significance in the present world of globalization. She is said to have endeavoured to dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrants who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values, inherent in their personality and their fascination for Western mode of living. Framed with the didactics of immigrants and emigrants, Mukherjee's fictional forte lays focus on the predicament of migrant entities and the possibilities for absorption and rejection in the new world. In a nutshell, it may be said that "no Indian woman expatriate novelist in the foreign soil is as remarkable as Bharati Mukherjee for her vivid life experience and a genuine portrayal of it in the form of fiction" (Patil 117). Her works have made a notable contribution to the multi-ethnic literature of the United States and as a writer, she has moved geographically from India to Canada and the USA and she is out and concerned with migrants, dislocations and relocations focusing on the inevitable consequences of cross-cultural encounters.

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