

## Expatriate Immigrants' Quandary in the Oeuvres of Bharati Mukherjee

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### Abstract

The rearticulated notions of Diasporas have played an important role in the cultural studies. Cultural fusion or hybridity is possible to some extent but transfer of cultures is not possible. It is apparently a deeper wound for the immigrants who are engaged in the struggle to achieve a new identity for themselves in an alien atmosphere. This paper '**Expatriate Immigrants' Quandary in the Oeuvres of Bharati Mukherjee**' broadly premises her novels that deal with the reality of individuals grappling with different cultures around the globe to find their real identity. Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists, notwithstanding their cultural and racial roots, invariably try to reach out to this refashioning of the self, which tends to be both painful and exhilarating. Bharati Mukherjee has explicitly formulated their migrant aesthetics in terms of their self-positioning within the national and cultural narrative of an American imagery. Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with Indian life realistically and poignantly in her novels, depicting their dreams and heartaches with irony. Bharati Mukherjee, being culturally uprooted, presents some of her own experiences through her characters. This paper brings out the theme of adjusting to a new culture. Through the trials, tribulations and trauma that afflict the immigrants, her protagonists, trying to cope with the new world, have been deftly handled with a combination of malice and charm, irony and sympathy. Bharati Mukherjee describes how her protagonists are pushed to the edges of their old world, and yet exiled from the new and how they try vainly to reconcile the two worlds in their hearts.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, National imagery, immigrants, aesthetics, alienation, Bharati Mukherjee

Expatriation is quite a widespread phenomenon in this century and is a complex state of mind and emotionally a wistful longing for the past. Expatriation is often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral or cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. This paper '**Expatriate Immigrants' Quandary in the Oeuvres of Bharati Mukherjee**' examines the works of Bharati Mukherjee and reveals a movement from expatriation to immigration. Bharati Mukherjee is mainly concerned with different aspects of the condition and plight of the immigrants. Her varied experiences in life find sufficient place in her writings both in her novels and short stories.

Bharati Mukherjee in her novels deals with the change from the position of expatriate to immigrant and reflects in her writings a movement from expatriation to immigration. The women of Bharati Mukherjee's works are not only from India but also from the cosmopolitan world of America. Bharati Mukherjee's novels have an unusually wide canvas. Across the world women writers from Indian Diaspora have carved their distinct niche. Bharati Mukherjee is one amongst them. Bharati Mukherjee, born in 1940 in Calcutta, married a Canadian fellow student Clark Blaise, at the University of Iowa. Deportation from a place plays a vital role in shaping Indian English sensibility. It is an intricate transformative procedure involving cross-cultural deviations, unable to use our native language, native mentality, struggling with the entry of new elements of new surroundings with combinations of both the cultures and loyalties. Bharati Mukherjee immigrated to Canada in 1968 with her husband Clarke Blaise, a Canadian writer whom she met while studying at the University of Iowa in America. The fourteen years in Canada were perhaps the most difficult years of her life for she witnessed herself as a victim of racial and ethnic discrimination. When she could bear it no longer, she went back to the United States where she was granted the status of permanent resident.

Bharati Mukherjee has successfully brought together her several observations in her personal experiences, life on the accountability of such experiences into a new kind of literature, the new immigrant literature, the most important themes in her novels being the description of the condition of the immigrants. Though her characters are aware of the social oppression and the brutalities inflicted on the women characters, they emerge as survivors who have successfully borne the brunt, both physical and emotional. Bharati Mukherjee narrates her stories from a wide variety of perspectives, concentrating up on the concept of self within a large society. Bharati Mukherjee's themes focus on the phenomenon of migration, the status of the new immigrants, the feeling of alienation as expatriates, and the Indian woman sojourning abroad struggling for identity. Bharati Mukherjee could not contain within her the strong urge to write about her own struggle with identity, first coming as an individual from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada and as an immigrant in the US.

'*Wife*' focuses on the life of Dimple, a middle-class Bengali girl married to Amit Basu, a consultant engineer. After their marriage, they migrate to America where Dimple encounters alienation, isolation and a deep sense of cultural shock. Dimple has many expectations from her married life; she believes that her marriage would bring her freedom, fortune and happiness. Unfortunately, Dimple's dreams about happiness are soon shattered. As her frustrations multiply she finds a way to end this torturous existence. She even contemplates the murder of her husband Amit. In the end she does kill him.

Dimple is suspended in a quandary of tension between American culture and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife, between a feminist desire to be self confident and independent and the Indian desire to be meek, shy and obliterated. Dimple has a longing inside her to stick to traditions, but at the same time she needs the authority of the American women's approach to freedom, in her desire to stand against the strict norms of Indian traditions. She finds herself in a dilemma because she is unable to come to any stand-point or any clear-cut

priority. Bharati Mukherjee clearly brings out the life of an immigrant involved in a series of reincarnations.

Bharati Mukherjee's "*Jasmine*" embodies the evolution of Jyoti, the fifth daughter of a family of nine girls. Jasmine's restless move from one place to the other betrays her, gripping her in alienation and bewilderment. A woman's individuality and self-confidence are portrayed through the character of Jasmine. Jasmine's story is about the trauma of moving and the joy of changing over that takes place when we migrate from one place to another, proceeding to grow out of the union of two cultures. She struggles as an illegal immigrant without passport, living among aliens whose ways she knows nothing about. The narrative unfolds portraying the ventures of the protagonist who reinvents herself after marriage as Jasmine. In the process of discovery and certitude she migrates to America as Jazz and then settles down as a mature woman under the pseudonym of Jane in the farm lands of Iowa.

Jasmine enters America illegally, learns how to survive there and to dress and walk like an American and thereby becoming a completely transformed woman. Jasmine emerges as a complete individual sustaining herself by her own efforts in a foreign land. Jasmine's intransigent attitude towards her native culture and up-bringing, naturally acts as a powerful magnet for all men who appreciate and admire her Indianness and her adaptability. Portrayed as a strong woman, Jasmine revolts against fate and conventions at every juncture. Jasmine's freedom, her loving spirit surfaces to the forefront throughout and she may be described as a rebel, an adapter and survivor. Jasmine gets subjected to multiple codes of society and geographical locales. Jasmine comprehends and adjusts herself to the conventional culture of the new land.

Jasmine undergoes, at every stage of change, mixed feelings of fear, anger, bitterness and confusion, but she discovers herself. Jasmine within her bears the unconquerable desire and struggle for self-denial and self-realization. Jasmine, with much struggle, adapts to the American lifestyle, yet she cannot efface the self sacrificing typical Indian woman within her. Jasmine revolts against the traditional conservative attitude of the Indians towards women who are not allowed to be self-reliant. It is the ability to adapt herself to the changing situations that make Jasmine so strange a woman. Jasmine enters the country by illegal means, without job, husband or papers. Jasmine faces rape by Half Face, but takes revenge on him by murdering him through marriage. Jasmine goes through various traumatic experiences before she gets settled in America. Concept of home and migration is very much strongly encapsulated in the writings that Bharati Mukherjee presents in "*Desirable Daughters*". The novel "*Desirable Daughters*" is not only a nostalgic romanticization of the past but also a reconstruction and revalidation of Tara's identity. The events and locales that form a part of Tara's identity have been nostalgically delineated by Bharati Mukherjee. On describing the cross-cultural impact on Tara's identity partly Indian and partly Americanized, the novelist portrays her as a hybrid subject, a mimicry of the American socio-cultural ethos. Tara leaves her husband for a life of her own, chooses a school for her son, and even takes the bold step of sharing her house with her lover Andy.

It is the sense of migration which brings about a change to the identity of Padma who has finally made New York her home, her land of choice. But her inalienable attachment to her home

makes her the sustainer and preserver of Bengali tradition in America. The alien culture fails to subvert her traditional identity. On the other hand it remaps and reconstructs her cultural identity. Parvati on the other hand is still conscious of her Indian tradition, which is well known from her letter she writes to Tara. Parvati advises Tara not to forget her tradition and not to get Americanized which of course goes only in vain. Parvati's consciousness of the Indian tradition and an Indian's socio-cultural identity is mirrored in her.

Tara is partially assimilated into the alien soil of America. Her attachment to the American culture is only skin deep and superficial. As a radicalized subject, Tara has to encounter the racist and nationalist ideology segregating her, pushing her away from the centre of American experience. Through Tara, Bharathi Mukherji voices her belief in the individual's liberty and freedom to mold, to reconstruct and reshape their identity. Tara was happy that her son was going to school with the children of San Francisco's bohemian elite kids. Also Tara is very stubborn and adamant on the other hand and was trying to reconstruct her existence through her emigration experience. She was attempting to redefine the importance of her culture through space and time.

Padma, the eldest one, is married to Harish Mehta, a non-Bengali business person and both are settled in Montclair, New Jersey, with their grown-up children. Padma still follows her Indian bun hairstyle and her dress code is restricted only to saris, mehendi, and henna decoration on the hands. Parvati, the second daughter lives in Mumbai with her rich businessman husband Aurobindo Banerji, an executive of a company. Tara and Bish settle down in Atherton. The irony is that what was thought to be a very predictable, successful marriage negotiation turns out to be a disastrous misbegotten marriage in Tara's life. Marriages in India are performed in accordance with the parents' choice. A girl is given off in marriage to a groom completely unknown to her. Tara expresses her dissatisfaction over this. In her Americanized status Tara has a philosophical quest in the web of dualism. This disentangles her complex identity in a different city, where she neither surrenders her personality, nor is she able to accept a new-found identity in the crisis of her life.

Tara lives physically in immense advantage but experiences a nomadic life in the cultural desert of America in her psychological invalidity. Being fed up with overflowing superfluity in her life of opulence, Tara breaks all taboos and walks out of wedlock with her son. She chooses a life having a sexual relationship with a Hungarian. Her divorce is not known to her parents in India, who like other parents desire their three daughters to live lives desirable to them for all time. Tara's divorce to Bish and re-marriage or re-housing with Andy is a transition in her life. She re-establishes her identity in immigrant sensibility and enjoys her life with Andy.

Tara's westernization has provoked her quest for identity in expatriate sensibility. Padma, six years senior to Tara, had the ambition for some form of exhibitionism and anxiety to marry and settle in America. After her marriage with Harish she is no more a simple upper class girl, but she has established herself as a multicultural performance artist, a writer, and glitterati on the Indo-American Television channels in New Jersey. Tara in her immigrant status has hyphenated herself with her native land though she feels insulated in the dilemma of being unable to return

home and find a home in the adopted land. Tara's identity is involved in her agonized experiences, nostalgia and feminine sensibilities. Tara's experiences bring her quest for individuality in the migrant culture of the Indians and the multi-cultural landscape of global migrants reveal the space of tradition and the fixed sense of identity of immigrant Indians.

Bharati Mukherjee's interpretation and reaction to her experience in Canada led her to see herself as an expatriate and this theme of expatriation is reflected in her writings. This movement coincides with her migration from Canada to the USA. There is a growing recognition of her as an immigrant with an increasingly strong attachment to the US and this experience of immigration is reflected in her writings. In short, expatriation focuses on the native country that has been left behind, while immigration emphasizes the country into which one has entered as a migrant. The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself or herself perpetually at a transit station, fraught with the memories of the original home which struggle with the realities of the new world.

Bharati Mukherjee's major literary work has highlighted the immigrants' anxiety. Transplantation of human beings from one cultural world to another is always painful, but it is more painful for the female immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee as an immigration writer has tried to give a voice to the South Asian immigrants in Canada and in the United States. In her own process of transplantation, from one socio-cultural background to another, she got various experiences both sweet and sour. Bharati Mukherjee's novels depict the misery and anxiety of the immigrants in the new land. As an immigrant, she suffered a lot and she has also witnessed the sufferings of the immigrants. Further she writes:

“In Canada I am the wife of a well-known Canadian writer who "also writes”, though people often assume it is in Bengali”.

This is the anxiety of the well-educated person in Canada; it is easy to understand about the average educated immigrants' situation on the alien soil. Bharati Mukherjee through her novels voices the surprised sighs, and the anxiety of the immigrants and their gradual assimilation with the change and with the new world. They suffer because of the discrimination of the culture, language, and way of living life, race and religion. Bharati Mukherjee brings out the image of expatriation as a symbolic restrictive and self-defeating attitude to be present in a writer. The expatriate writer heals his or her grievances, parades her pain of exile and becomes a permanent sufferer.

In these novels, the expatriation of immigrants is not only considered to be a major theme, but it becomes a personification of human characteristic, falling for rooted levels of alienation like existential alienation and self-estrangement. Bharati Mukherjee explores in her works the immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality and fluid identity and acknowledging alternate realities. Bharati Mukherjee clearly articulates her movement from expatriation to immigration and traces the change to the act of migrating. Unlike the expatriate, the immigrant descends into the present and gets enthusiastically involved in the environment around him. While the expatriate parades pain and grievance, the immigrant celebrates the fact of being alive

in a new world, of being reborn. They themselves change in the encounter of cultures and they also bring out change in their environment.

It is always an arduous task for the immigrants to find themselves placed in the strange land as they cannot overcome the deeply imbedded memories of their original land and they also cannot get adapted to the realities of the new immigrant world. Bharati Mukherjee had the advantage of mixed sensibilities. With an intimate understanding of the tradition and values of both cultures, she has viewed the challenges of the contrasting cultures in many close quarters. She explores the possibility of human relationships through cross-cultural interaction, charting the emotional response and psychological motivation by placing her protagonists in such situations.

In dealing with the theme of cross-cultural interaction, Bharati Mukherjee's attitude is dispassionate and balanced. She neither extols the Indian way of life nor condemns the western culture. Bharati Mukherjee does not intend to drive home the point that immigrants can never easily adapt themselves to the place which they have emigrated. But she points out the mingling of two cultures sometimes results in intense shock and sometimes in exquisite fusion. Bharati Mukherjee is concerned with problems of migration, dislocation and relocation, the consequences of displacements and cross-cultural encounters in her works. Inevitably, her works are preoccupied with the notion of belonging, the idea of restlessness, the feeling of alienation and search for a home. It also includes a questioning of biases and prejudices, a deconstruction of social, cultural and national stereotypes and a envisioning of ideas and concepts that belong to two antipodal worlds.

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