



DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SELECT FICTIONAL WORKS

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee holds an esteemed position among the diasporic writers of Indian origin with her remarkable contributions like Jasmine, The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, Desirable Daughter etc. Her literary works are firmly based on the immigrants' experience in a completely alien land, the intense pain of dislocation and displacement from one's homeland towards adopting and adapting the foreign country and its different culture. Although Bharati Mukherjee was born and brought up in India, she spent most of her literary career in USA and Canada. Naturally she can well connect her own experience with the feelings and sensibilities of the immigrants who suddenly feel themselves uprooted from their homeland but find it too difficult to adjust and assimilate in the new ambience, new culture and standards of society. Bharati Mukherjee's works attract the readers' attention for the authentic overtone, realistic description, penetrating observatory power while her portrayal of characters evokes originality in their Indianness and their feelings so genuinely expressed as to mesmerize the readers in the narrative. This paper intends to highlight Bharati Mukherjee's portrayal of the immigrants, their intense feelings of loneliness in the present situation, nostalgia towards past and the problems of identity in connecting the two disparate cultures.

Keywords: Immigration, Identity Crisis, Cultural Dissonance, Social Mainstreaming, Cross-cultural Conflict, Dilemma, Trauma, Native Culture, Host Culture.

Introduction

In the genre of Indian American diasporic fiction Bharati Mukherjee is one of the finest writers who meticulously deals with the phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of isolation and identity crisis, often experienced by the expatriates. Her writings bring unique insight and profundity to the

immigration and assimilation of South Asians in America. Herself being a migrated author Bharati Mukherjee is conscious about the socio-cultural and psychological conditions which the characters face in the host country and also throws light on new possibilities for social amalgamation and cultural creolization. In an interview to the Massachusetts Review, Mukherjee states: “The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time, they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make-up” (654). Her writings cover a vast canvas of diaspora issues such as dislocation, fragmentation, nostalgia for home, marginalization, racial hatred, cultural and gender hatred, racial conflicts, identity crisis, generation differences, transformation of subjectivities, emergence of new patterns of life with cross-cultural interaction and disintegration of family units etc.

Bharati Mukherjee chooses herself to be addressed as an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. Faced with the dilemma of her own cultural location in the new nation, Mukherjee observes:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil and religious 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 two hundred years American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic. (38)

While dealing with the issues of immigration to and assimilation with a new land, a new culture, a new society and a new standards and convention, Bharati Mukherjee depicts her characters as lost souls who remain indecisive about their status and search for their identity, their roots and their heritage. Bharati Mukherjee’s career can be conveniently divided in three stages: the phase of Expatriation (from 1972 to 1979), the phase of Transition (1980 to 1988), and the phase of Immigration (from 1989 onwards). In the phase of Expatriation she wrote two novels and a nonfiction; *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975) and *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977). During the period of Transition she wrote short stories collections and a non-fiction; *Darkness* (1985), *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). In the phase of Immigration she wrote four novels; *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave It to Me* (1997) and *Desirable Daughter* (2002).

Diaspora and the Baggage of Isolation and Identity Crisis

Although the Greek etymological meaning of diaspora restricts itself to the scattering, dispersing and migration of the Jews after the Holocaust, the term now encompasses the experiences and sensibilities of the immigrants and the expatriates all over the world. To be precise, diaspora may be defined as the voluntary or involuntary movement of people from their homeland into a new geographical region. Alternatively, diaspora is the dislocation of a community or a group from their homeland to relocation into a foreign land. Once they arrive in

a new geographical and cultural region, the diasporic community forcefully negotiate between two different cultures—the new and the old one. Resultantly diasporic culture becomes the amalgamation of disparate cultures, a mosaic of cultures. The de-territorialization of a community and their feelings of isolation and the re-territorialization of the same community and their identity crisis become the main focus of diasporic writing. In fact, diasporic literature is all about, as Pramod Nayar observes, “a negotiation with a retreating history, past, traditions and customs” and looking forward to “a future, seeking new vistas, new chances” (188). The dual characteristic mode of diasporic literature has been marvellously captured by Salman Rushdie: “What is the best thing about migrant people...? I think it is their hopefulness... And what’s the worst thing? It’s the emptiness of one’s baggage. We’ve come unstuck from more than land. We’ve floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time” (91).

The terrible sense of isolation and its corollary identity crisis are quintessence to the diasporic experience, as Rohinton Mistry pathetically observes:

“Going to Canada, faced with the reality of earning a living and realizing that although I had, up to that point in my life, read books and listened to music that came from the West, there was a lot more involved in living in the West... but actually living in the West made the same music seem much less relevant. It suddenly brought home to me very clearly the fact that I was imitating something that was not mine, that made no sense in terms of my own life, my own reality” (Nayar 204).

Actually, immigrants in a new world are like transplanted people who desperately want to adapt themselves in the new environment and socio-cultural ambience. Another well acclaimed Indian-American diasporic writer Jhumpa Lahiri shares her own experience in an interview:

When I was growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970s, I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, approved of on either side of the hyphen. Looking back, I see that this was generally the case. But my perception as a young girl was that I felt short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions had nothing to do with one another. At home, I followed the costumes of my parents, speaking Bengali and eating rice and dal with my fingers. These ordinary facts seemed part of a secret, utterly alien way of life, and I took pains to hide them from my American friends. (Lahiri 2008)

Diasporic experience embraces within itself a sense of alienation and displacement, quest for identity as well as cultural disconnection, experienced by the immigrants who find themselves trapped between the cultures of their homeland, i.e. Indian culture and of their host land or adopted country and Bharati Mukherjee's fictional works like *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Desirable Daughter* etc. are excellent instances to this experience. Bharati Mukherjee is the strong voice of the immigrants from all over the world in USA, because of her determined rejection of the emotional paralysis of exile and her affirmation of the immigrant condition:

"I have been murdered and reborn at least three times, the very correct young woman I was trained to be, and was very happy being, is very different from the politicized, shrill, civil rights activist I was in Canada, and from the urgent writer that I have become in the last few years in the United States." In her Introduction to *Darkness* the author openly admits about her own experiences as an immigrant:

"If you have to wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait surrendering little bits of reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past you'll never belong, anywhere... I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous, driven, underclass of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to distant homeland but no real desire for permanent return. I see my 'immigrant' story replicated in a dozen American cities, and instead of seeking my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse, a 'visible' disfigurement to be hidden), I see it now as set of fluid identities to celebrate" (*Darkness*, 3).

The shift to America brought sea-change in her personality and presented a new stimulus to her literary aspiration. Her own acknowledgement regarding this is highly remarkable as, "For me it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration" (*Darkness*, 3).

Diasporic Experiences of Mukherjee's Women Protagonists

Bharati Mukherjee is renowned for narratives whose protagonists are Indian immigrant female characters. Her writings deal with women who experience culture clash and identity crisis as a result of their displacement, yearn to determine their identities through a psychological transformation in their diasporic journeys: "The finding of a new identity.... the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born in to and then replanting yourself in another culture" (Nayak 123). In her novels Mukherjee attempts to express the newfound identity of immigrant women who struggle to survive in an alien land. Mukherjee asserted that in diasporas one's biological identity may not be one's real identity as immigration brings changes, physical and psychological both. She realized that her transformation was a two-way process because it affected both the individual as well as the cultural identity. Salman Rushdie aptly describes this psychological condition of immigrants in his essay *Imaginary Homelands*:

I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated...and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, postlapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result- as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates- we are now partly of the west. Our identity is at once plural and Partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools (Rushdie 15).

Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a marvellous manifestation of an immigrant's quest for identity amid cultural conflict. It was conceived in a very difficult phase of life when the heroine of the novel was struggling to determine her own identity in the Indian culture. The story of the novel runs parallel to Mukherjee's own experience when she returned to India with her Canadian husband Clark Blaise in 1973. The protagonist Tara Cartwright Banerjee returns her home after gap of seven years to find her identity and her place in the society. Tara goes America for higher study. In Poughkeepsie she feels discrimination and humiliation. She falls in love with David Cartwright. David is completely western and he is not interested about her culture and family genealogies. After landing at Bombay airport, she views India with the keenness of a foreigner. She is welcomed warmly by her relatives, but her response is very cold. Seven years back on her way to Vassar "she had admired the house on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her" (22). Tara's reaction towards the railway station is also one of despise. She "thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks" (24). Though she is surrounded by the army of relatives at the Howrah station, she feels completely alone. In America in spite of having a white husband, she always feels isolated and a stranger. When she is worshipping with her mother, she forgets the rituals. She realizes that "it was not a simple loss... this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre" (64). She spends much of her time in the Catelli-Continental hotel in the company of her friends. But after sometimes their attitudes towards her marriage unsettle her. They want to listen stories about American lifestyle, television, automobiles, frozen foods, and record players but they are not ready to accept her marriage with a foreigner. Her friends and relatives make her feel that her marriage is imprudent. Tara Banerjee is torn between two cultures. She feels isolated, alien, and rootless in America so she decides to marry David. Despite having a white husband, she cannot assimilate in mainstream American culture. In an attempt to Americanize herself, she loses her Indian identity and becomes an expatriate. The last pages of the novel are full of riots of the Naxalite movement. Tara decides to go back to America, and calls her friends at Catelli-Continental to inform them about her plan. In the meantime the mob marches towards Catelli-Continental so she and her friends are surrounded by rioters. The novel ends with "Tara, still locked in a car across the street from the Catelli-Continental, wondered whether she would ever get out of Calcutta, and if she did not, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely" (247- 248). What Mukherjee wants to show is that Tara becomes lonely in her own native land, whereas she

was expecting for a long time in America that, “all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta” (25).

The same note of identity crisis and cultural conflict can also be seen in Mukherjee’s novel *Wife* which focuses on how cultural displacement or dislocation cause new identities but through a rigorous path. In *Wife*, Mukherjee expresses and challenges the hardships of multicultural society of an immigrant. In an interview Bharati Mukherjee said about the novel, “It was very much an immigrant book. The *Wife* was going through feminist and immigrant crises. The style was distinctly American in that omniscience was no longer natural to me. I was closer to my character and the material was more passionate. I had sacrificed irony for passion” (Steinberg 33). Dimple Dasgupta, the heroine of the novel migrates to America because of her marriage with Amit. She imagines that moving to U.S. will bring about a sea-change in her life, as she believes firmly “real happiness was just in the movies or in the West” (47). Though married to an educated husband Dimple is not able to strike a balance between the two juxtaposed worlds, the one she left behind and the other she has come to live in. She was always been conscious of her foreignness. On more than one occasion she realizes that she is an outsider in America. She becomes unable to fit in the culture of America and it fills her with a sense of identity crisis. Thus Dimple appears as a victim of conflicting cultures. She fails to be at peace with herself as well as with her surroundings:

“She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness” (115).

She cannot come to terms with either her own culture or America’s culture; she finds herself at cross-roads and visualizes her life as dying bonfire. Mukherjee wonderfully describes Dimple’s situation as an immigrant: “She remains neither an American nor an Indian. She keeps hanging in the air like the mythical “Trishanku” and typifies the real condition of a person who is caught in the net of two cultures (Banerjee 67).

Both Tara as well as Dimple suffer from cultural alienation by rejecting and repelling from reality. Eventually escaping into illusion, they drift farther away from reality, leading to nowhere but Mukherjee’s third novel *Jasmine* represents assimilation of different culture more. *Jasmine* reveals a more positivistic approach to the problem of immigration. It is a poignant story of survival, expediency, compromises, losses and adjustments involved in the process of acculturation to American life. *Jasmine* is a novel of immigration and assimilation both on the physical and psychological levels. Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experience of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself. Bharati Mukherjee said about *Jasmine* in an interview with Ameena Meer, “I think of *Jasmine* and many of my characters, as being people who are pulling themselves out of the very traditional world in which

their fate is predetermined, their destiny resigned to the stars. But Jasmine says: I'm going to reposition the stars" (Meer 26). While the protagonists of *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* are identified by their relationship with father or husband, Jasmine has her own individual identity. Ralph J. Crane has justifiably pointed out "Mukherjee increases the distance between herself and the protagonists from novel to novel. Tara is closer to her, Dimple represents Indian wives in United States and Jasmine represents all immigrant women who are freewheeling spirits ready to shape their own destiny".

In this novel Bharati Mukherjee tries to show cross-cultural transition through the protagonist Jasmine's odyssey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York, and Iowa. The story revolves around the protagonist Jyoti who was born in Hasnapur village of Punjab. During her transformations, she changes her name continuously which suggests her gradual acculturation in American culture. Jyoti of Hasnapur becomes Jasmine for Prakash, Jase for Taylor, Jane for Bud and Kali for Half-Face. *Jasmine* is the story of a young Indian woman from Punjab, India who experiences identity crisis and cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. In other words, the story narrates Jasmine's search for her true and unfragmented identity and the transformations she experiences in a positive and optimistic way. Contrary to the traditional woman's image, it presents a diametrically opposite picture of the woman who can be termed as the new woman. This woman has come to signify the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. The heroine of the novel Jasmine arrives in America with the hope of fulfilling the unfinished dreams of her husband but she suffers from a sense of exile. On reaching U.S. she begins to search for self-independence. She struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realizes that self-independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace with herself. On more than one occasion she realizes that she is an outsider in America. She passes through different stages, in childhood she transits from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jasmine to Jase and from Jase to Jane. Her journey begins from a small village of Punjab from where she moves to Jalandhar and then to U.S. In this gradual process of migration, she has to pass through different environmental and societal changes. These changes have tremendous effect on her life. She does not remain same at every stage of her life. She has not preferred the change voluntarily. At every stage of her life, she suffers because of her Indian cultural consciousness. Mukherjee depicts Jasmine's character as bold, independent and ready to act kind which is not thought in an orthodox or conservative society which is the reason for her alienation. Thus for Jasmine exit from her old culture and immigration to new land becomes an exciting and exhilarating process. In deserting Bud and choosing Taylor Jasmine does not exchange between men but she changes her whole world. As she herself confides "I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness" (240). Jasmine chooses a life of happiness and freedom with Taylor and Duff. She again discards her identity of Jase and she is ready for transformation. She does not feel guilty for deserting Bud: "It isn't guilt that I feel, it's relief. I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventures, risk, and transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me reposition the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove" (240). From the beginning Jasmine

chooses her own path. She is ready to mould herself according to the need of American Society. She becomes wholly American at the end of the novel.

Bharati Mukherjee's earlier novels deal with expatriation, immigration, translation, and negotiation with the cultures. She puts emphasis on breaking the ties with motherland and accepting culture, tradition, and values of the host land to assimilate in mainstream society. In *Desirable Daughters* she focuses on cultural hybridity, hybrid identity and third interspatial space. James Lull writes about the need of hybrid culture: "The challenge for people today is to navigate and combine an unprecedented range of cultural territories, and recurrences, ranging from relatively unfamiliar terrains imported to the self through technological mediation and human migrations of various types, to territory that is for more familiar and stable, such as that offered by religion, notion, and family, in order to invent combinations that satisfy individual's changing needs"(Lull 138). Bharati Mukherjee writes about the cultural hybridity in *Desirable Daughters*. The novel revolves around the life of three sisters Padma, Parvati and Tara who take different paths in their life. Padma, Parvati and Tara are daughters of Motilal Bhattacharjee, a trained engineer, who had setup tea business. The Bhattacharjees stay in Raj style fortress of home on Ballygunge Park Road. They belong to the society: "To be Calcutta bhadra lok, as we Bhattacharjees were, was to share a tradition of leadership, of sensitivity, of achievement, refinement, and beauty that was the envy of the world. That is the legacy of the last generation of Calcutta high society, a world into which we three sisters were born, and from which we have made our separate exits" (22) As the story unfolds Padma, the eldest daughter, lives with her husband Harish Mehta, a divorcee with two children in New Jersey. Parvati, the middle daughter, lives with her husband Aurobindo and her two sons Dinesh and Bhupesh in Bombay. Tara, the youngest daughter, lives with Andy, a Hungarian Buddhist, and her son Rabi in California. Bharati Mukherjee puts emphasis on cultural hybridity in the novel. In her former novels she advocates exuberance of immigration but in *Desirable Daughters* she focuses on cultural hybridity and third interspatial space. Tara is cultural hybrid who feels at home in America and India. Tara accepts free and modern views of the United States and at the same time she also gives importance to her culture, family, and tradition. She is the fusion of two cultures. Padma and Parvati in spite of their encounter with American society cling to the Bengali culture and tradition. They are not ready to change themselves. Three sisters take different paths to belong in the mainstream culture. Padma lives the Bengali life in New York. Even she socializes only with Indian. She becomes icon of the Bengali culture among the Bengalis. She earns money by catering the cultural need of Indians. She lives a life of expatriate. She clings to her culture, identity and ethnicity. On the other hand, Tara respects her culture and identity but she becomes part of American society. Tara criticizes Padma for clinging to Indian way of life in America:

In the years of our estrangement, I had never thought of her as bold, defiant or path breaking. Her clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a —charming accent had seemed to me a cowardly way of coping

with a new century. Change is corruption: she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don't let it furnish you any way. (134)

Unlike Padma, Tara carefully negotiates between Indian tradition and open culture of America. Tara feels herself at home in India, San Francisco and Atherton. She breaks prevalent notions of culture, identity and homeland. Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* is a fine illustration of cultural hybridity in diaspora about which Homi Bhabha says in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford:

The notion of hybridity comes from two prior descriptions...the genealogy of difference and the idea of translation...the act of cultural translation.(both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture...all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace to original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives...hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them. (Rutherford 211-16).

Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee has achieved great recognition within a short span of time as a diasporic writer through her fictional works on immigration, cross-cultural experiences, and assimilation with unique cross-cultural sensibility from her personal experiences as an expatriate and immigrant in the United States. Mukherjee's creativity is focused with razor sharp precision on her diasporic imagination which transcends the rhetorical dimension of the text and becomes the material core of Mukherjee's narrativity. Refashioning of self is a prerequisite in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions. Each of the characters of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction such as Jasmine, Tara Cartwright, Dimple and Tara Chatterjee re-incarnates herself with a new identity as a strategy to pave a path to a future, which provides freedom of expression, be it in their sensuality or be it the voicing of their suppressed selves. The process of reincarnation once started, through dislocations and re-locations, the women in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions cannot regress back nor can they stop it. The only thing they resort to, is to be re-placed into the New World with rupturing the body, mind and soul in an ongoing resort to root search. She also refers to the transformative energy in her women characters and says: 'They take risks they wouldn't have taken in their old, comfortable worlds to solve their problems. As they change citizenship, they are reborn.' In conclusion it may be said that Bharati Mukherjee has explored many facets of diasporic consciousness and immigrant experience of dislocations, ruptures and relocation of the migrant women in her fictions.

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