

# CLASHES OF CULTURE IN THE NOVEL OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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**ABSTRACT:** *This study is an attempt to analyze Bharati Mukherjee's novels from a cross-culture perspective. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of the Indian diaspora in the United States. She is an American writer of Indian origin who writes about the immigrant experiences of women from India in the United States and the problems faced by them in adjusting to the culture of the alien land. Mukherjee's own biographical path covers India, Canada and the United States, and her novels focus mainly on dislocation, alienation and assimilation in the alien land. She has written eight novels, two collections of short stories such as *Darkness and The Middleman and Other Stories*, and two non-fiction books in collaboration with her husband Clarke Blaise. Bharati Mukherjee's creative world best manifests immigrant experience in cross-cultural confrontation. Her novels deal with expatriates, exiles, and immigrants from Third World countries especially from India as in her earlier novels *The Tiger's Daughter, Wife, Jasmine, Leave It to Me, Desirable Daughters and The Tree Bride* or immigrants from America as in *The Holder of the World, The Tree Bride and Miss New India*. Bharati Mukherjee has thus 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.*

**Keywords:** *Bharati Mukherjee, CULTURE, Short Stories, English*

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is the written work of a specific culture, sub-culture, religion, philosophy or the study of such written work which may appear in poetry or in prose. Literature, in the west, originated in the southern Mesopotamia region of Sumer in the city of Uruk and flourished in Egypt, later in Greece and from there, to Rome. Writing seems to have originated independently in China from divination practices and also independently in Mesoamerica and elsewhere. The first author of literature in the world, known by name, was the high-priestess of Ur, Enheduanna who wrote hymns in praise of the Sumerian goddess Inanna. Much of the early literature from Mesopotamia concerns the activities of the gods but, in time, humans came to be featured as the main characters in such poems as *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* and *Lugalbanda and Mount Hurrum*. For the purposes of study, Literature is divided into the categories of fiction or non-fiction today but these are often arbitrary decisions as ancient literature, as understood by those who wrote the tales down, as well as those who heard them spoken or sung pre-literacy, was not understood in the same way as it is in the modern-day.

English literature is hundreds of years old and continues to be one of the most popular courses of study in high schools and universities around the world. Learn about what defines English literature and a few of its greatest writers. English literature is the study of literature written in the English language. The writers do not necessarily have to be from England but can be from all over the world. It includes some of history's most famous writers: James Joyce (Ireland), William Shakespeare (England), Mark Twain (United States), Arthur Conan Doyle (Scotland), Dylan Thomas (Wales), and Vladimir Nabokov (Russia), just to name a few.

English literature dates back more than five centuries. It represents writers not only from different parts of the world and time periods, but it covers every major genre and style of writing as well. So there are about a thousand things for a teenager, or even a 50-year-old adult, to do in today's wired, 500-channel cable television world. We can watch feature films on our phones or hop in a car and drive a hundred miles away in just a couple of hours. That's not how things used to be. People used to read literature for entertainment because even just 50 years ago, there were simply not many readily available entertainment options.

Despite these other entertainment options, English literature remains popular. It is time-tested and well-worn for a reason. English literature deals with universal themes and values that help us grow in our everyday lives. It also teaches us about different time periods and faraway places.

Its beginnings receive their impetus from three sources - the British government's educational reforms, the work of missionaries, and the reception of English language and literature by upper-class Indians. First, there are the educational reforms called for by both the Charter Act of 1813 and the 1835 English Education Act of William Bentinck. In an effort to redress some of the greedy practices of the British East India Company servants, the English Parliament approved the Charter Act, which made England responsible for the educational improvement of the natives. The subsequent English Education Act, prompted by Macaulay's famous minute on Indian education, made English the medium of Indian education and English literature a disciplinary subject in Indian educational institutions. It may be noted here that even before Bentinck's 1835 English Education Act, instruction in English existed in Indian colleges. In the early 1800s, English was taught side by side with Oriental studies, its teaching marked by the sort of classical approach taken to Latin and Greek in British colleges.

However, with the withdrawal of funds to Oriental studies, the secular character of such instruction was to give way to an increasingly Christian inflection. Missionary activity, the second aspect contributing to the origin of Indian literature in English, profited directly from this shift in emphasis. The 1813 Charter Act had opened India to the missionaries, but it posed no serious threat to the Orientalists. With the passing of the 1835 English Education Act, Orientalism received its most severe blow, and, most satisfyingly to the missionaries, English emerged as the sole bearer of morality. However, above and beyond the educational reforms and the missionary activities, it was the vested interests on part of the higher class Indians to receive the benefits arising out of English education that assured the place of English language and literature in the stream of Indian education. Hence, the third impetus to the beginnings of Indian writing in English.

In the simplest terms, a novel is a fictional prose work of considerable length. Beyond that, though, novels aren't so simple anymore. By this meaning, Egyptian works from around 1200 BCE could be designated as some of the first novels. Extended works of prose fiction also found fans among the ancient Greeks and Romans, with such authors as Heliodoros, who wrote *Ethiopian Romance*, and Apuleius, who wrote *The Golden Ass*, producing memorable pieces still in circulation today. English novel came into existence in the beginning of 18th century with the emergence of new middle class. During this time, public interest in human characters grew and this led to the popularity of autobiographies, biographies, journals, diaries and memoirs. Novelists showed interest in the newly emerged complex middle-class characters who were struggling with their morality and social issues. *Tom Jones*, a founding was written by Henry Fielding during this time and focused on the social structure that prevailed in England during that time.

### **Bharati Mukherjee**

Bharati Mukherjee, (born July 27, 1940, Calcutta, India), Indian-born American novelist and short-story writer whose work reflects Indian culture and immigrant experience. Mukherjee was born into a wealthy Calcutta family. She attended an anglicized Bengali school from 1944 to 1948. After three years abroad, the family returned to India. Mukherjee attended the University of Calcutta (B.A., 1959) and the University of Baroda (M.A., 1961).

She then entered the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, earning an M.F.A. in 1963 and a Ph.D. in 1969. From 1966 to 1980 she lived in Montreal, which she found provincial and racist. She then moved to the United States in 1980 and began teaching at the university level. She became a U.S. citizen in 1989 and that year accepted a position teaching postcolonial and world literature at the University of California at Berkeley.

Mukherjee's work features not only cultural clashes but undercurrents of violence. Her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), tells of a sheltered Indian woman jolted by immersion in American culture, then again shocked by her return to a violent Calcutta. *Wife* (1975) details the descent into madness of an Indian woman trapped in New York City by the fears and passivity resulting from her upbringing. In Mukherjee's first book of short fiction, *Darkness* (1985), many of the stories, including the acclaimed "The World According to Hsü," are not only indictments of Canadian racism and traditional Indian views of women but also sharp studies of the edgy inner lives of her characters. *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) centres on immigrants in the United States who are from developing countries, which is also the subject of two later novels, *Jasmine* (1989) and *The Holder of the World* (1993).

### **Wife**

*Wife* is a touchy story, depicting the plight of a young woman, endeavored to be an ideal wife and finally being unable to endure the suppression of the patriarchal society ultimately kills her husband.

### **The Tiger's Daughters**

*The Tiger's Daughter* is the tale of a young girl, after being away for a long time, returns back to India, only to live in dark poverty. The novel at the same time commemorates the novelist's own experience, who is affected by the poverty and chaos when came back to India.

### **Jasmine**

*Jasmine* is the story of hypersensitive women who was widowed in the young age of seventeen, who finally was bound to earn living as a health professional.

### **The Holder of the World**

*The Holder of the World* represents a spatiotemporal connection between the oriental and the Occidental Cultures. The story is told in Hannah's standpoint, who came to India from Massachusetts.

### **Leave it To Me**

*Leave It To Me* is the psychoanalysis which deals with a young girl seeks for vengeance to her parents who abandoned her.

### **Short Stories**

**Darkness:** *Darkness* is a collection of twelve short stories depicting the difficulties of the Indian immigrants residing in the United States and Canada.

### **The Middleman and other stories**

*The middleman and other Short stories* depicts the cultural fusion of East and West. The amalgamation of the eastern immigrants residing in West, with Western Culture is one of the major themes of the Book.

### **Non fiction**

#### **Days and Nights in Calcutta**

Centering on the phenomenon of migration, "Days and Nights" mainly depicts the experiences of the author, when she came back to India after her marriage.

#### **The Sorrow and the Terror**

*The Sorrow and Terror* is a poignant story pointing the awful terror based on the racism. Set on the background of air crash in 1985, the sorrow and Terror mainly depicts the racial discrimination in India as an essential feature.

Additionally, the definition of "culture" itself is divided in its signification, since the term is open to a variety of interpretive strategies. Raymond Williams, for instance, imparts an anthropological sense to the term, when he observes that "Culture was made into an entity, a positive body of achievements and habits, precisely to express a mode of living superior to that being brought about by the 'progress of civilization'."

## CLASHES OF CULTURE IN THE NOVEL OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most influential literary figures of Indian women writers in English who is honoured as the „Grande dame“ of diasporic Indian English literature. She has been termed as an Asian- American writer, Indo-American writer, Indian Diaspora writer, writer of immigrant fiction and non-fiction, and American writer of mainstream today. As Clark Blaise puts it - “Bharati has become one of America’s best known novelists and short-story writers” (Blaise and Mukherjee, “Prologue” to *Days and Nights*, vi). Raj Chetty (2006) opines that American author Bharati Mukherjee could be easily seen as “Lahiri’s foremother” (75). Her journey from India to England - India - USA - Canada - USA - made her an expatriate writer like V. S. Naipaul, immigrant writer and American mainstream writer like Bernard Malamud and Henry Roth. She has developed a reputation for exploring the meeting of the Third World and the First World from the perspective of an immigrant to the North America, Canada and USA.

She is an activist of civil rights, educator, an author of highly praised novels, two collections of short stories and non-fiction works. She utilizes her own personal experiences in crossing the cultural boundaries. She is a well-known writer of Indian diaspora in USA, though she expects to be seen as (North) American Writer and rejects her hyphenated identity as Asian-American or Indo-American (Mukherjee, “American Dreamer”). Her works can certainly be read in the national context of Indian writing in English and in the international context of the literature of the Indian diaspora. Also her work locates her in the American context. She 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.”*

Jyoti was born into a traditional family eighteen years after the partition riots. Although she is undesirable female child, she is bold and intelligent, the first ever likely student of Masterji fit for English education. In the very beginning of the novel, the astrologer forecasts her widowhood and exile in the future but Jyoti refuses to accept the fate. Right from her childhood, she longs for a „special“ existence and had the conviction that she is special, beautiful and intelligent. She does not believe in the traditional ideology. Hence she longs to flee from the dirty, mean chores that women are expected to perform as a part of their duty:

On the far side of the country and by the buffalo enclosures, the maid servant’s pretty little girl was scooping up fresh dung, kneading it thick with straw chips, and patting them into the cake size of her palms. *She would slag the cakes down on the adobe walls of our kitchen enclosures and leave them to dry into fuel.* (JS 16)

From the very beginning she was very conscious of her identity. Her psyche was born out of two complexes – her existence as a woman and her so-called derogatory status for being a „village girl“. She asserts very frankly:

*“...that big-city men prefer us village girls because we are brought up to be caring and have no minds of our own. Village girls are like cattle, whichever way you lead them, that is the way they will go.”* (JS 39)

She comes in contact with Prakash who is a modern city man who believes in trashing traditions. After marriage she becomes a true wife in the Indian sense of the term identifying her husband’s wishes with those of hers. At that time Prakash was trying to get admission in some American Institute of Technology. He was very broad minded and insisted her to call him by his first name. He proves to be an ideal husband any girl would yearn for. He, with his generous efforts, transformed Jyoti into Jasmine – the sweet smelling flower, thus pulling her out from the rotten Hasnapur stench.

Prakash is a forward-thinking modern man. He believes in the concept of man-woman equality. The harmony in the marital relationship of Prakash and Jyoti is expressed through the nomenclature too. Both their names signify „light“. He always advocates a whole new concept of freedom and individual identity. But the cultural constraints that constitute Jyoti’s psyche let her not to dissolve her identity in the unconventional progressive ways of Prakash:

*“He wanted me to call him by his first name.”* Only in feudal societies is the woman still a vassal; he explained. *“Hasnapur is feudal”. In Hasnapur, wives used only pronouns to address their husbands. The first months, eager and obedient as I still had a hard time calling him Prakash, I’d cough to get his attention or start with. “Are you listening?” Every time I coughed he’d say “Do I hear a crow trying human speech?”* (JS 51)

Though Prakash is quite broadminded, it is revealed that he superimposed his own ideas and way of thinking on Jasmine. It is very evident that he holds her in his fist and tries to remould her identity as per his own wishes just like Lady Caroline’s act towards Valmikiin Kamala Markandaya’s „*Possession*‘. In Jasmine’s case the truth is to be admitted that even before entering the trans-cultural spaces and encountering the trauma of alienation on the alien land, her integrated psyche was shattered as she says:

*“Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.”* (JS 70)

Jasmine was indulged in the day-dreaming about her future life in America with Prakash. Unfortunately for Jasmine this dream, full of happiness, does not last long.

## CULTURAL ENCOUNTER IN THE NOVELS OF BHARTI MUKHERJEE’S WIFE AND JASMINE

Bharati Mukherjee is a prominent novelist, short-story and non-fiction writer. In her works, the main focus is on the phenomenon of migration, the experiences faced by immigrants, the struggle faced by the female protagonists to achieve autonomous selfhood in the new lands, and the contentment experienced by the immigrants in the country of the immigrants. In her novel, *Jasmine*, its protagonist Jasmine has to encounter various cultural identities; yet she negotiates with every new identity she faces. The present paper depicts the experiences faced by the protagonist, her resistance to the popular dominant culture of two different countries and the reactions made by her towards the existing culture.

*Jasmine* and its protagonist’s conflict with dominant cultures in India and in other countries after her migration. Jasmine conflicts with the culture in which she is born, she resists the traditional stereotypical roles from her childhood. However, she does not follow the Western culture blindly; rather she transforms herself into an individual who is not bounded by any ethnic, cultural identities. She is neither a passive person nor does she victimise herself; rather she negotiates with every new identity imposed upon her by others.

Now there are of course higher cultures and lower cultures, and higher cultures in general are distinguished by differentiation of function, so that you can speak of the less cultured and the more cultured strata of society, and, finally, you can speak of individuals as being exceptionally cultured. Eliot believes that there is very close relationship between culture and religion. It is religion of a people which makes them culturally different from the people. Eliot begins his enquiry into the relationship between culture and religion as, No culture has

appeared or developed except together with religion culture will appear to be the product of religion or the religion the product of the culture. This shows that culture and religion are complementary to each other. But though religion forms a sound basis of a culture, in actual life, culture and religion are not so completely united. As well as, the survival of the culture of the higher class is dependent upon the health of the culture of the people in general and as a whole.

Thus according to Eliot there are three ways of regarding culture: as the culture of the individual as the culture of a group or class, or as the culture of a whole society. Eliot is of the view that, The culture of the individual is dependent Upon the culture of a group or class, and that the culture of the group or class is dependent upon the culture of the whole society to which that group or class belongs. Therefore, it is the culture of the society that is fundamental.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the class which moves out of its cultural, contours, has no love lost for its mother land moreover, there is so much of cultural mixing in the post-colonial era that it has given birth to „hybrid-culture“ In every country the highest class (especially in India) is worse affected by this phenomenon.

Bharti Mukherjee's creative world best manifests immigrant experience through this cultural point of view. The relation between literature and society is reciprocal, both serve as cause and effect to each other. Of all the literary forms the novel is considered to be socially oriented because it depicts human relationship in its varied aspects. One of the most significant theme of modern Indian fiction is that of man women relationships. Writers as varied as Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sehgal, R.W. Desai, Mohan Rakesh, Bharti Mukherjee, Shobha De have treated this subject most intensely and extensively. The age old institution of family and marriage have been under a tremendous strain in the modern times. Commenting upon the breaking up of the family one of the major factors for the disintegration of the families is the rampant promiscuity in sexual relation. Yet another cause is that by winning a right to enter the labour market women have found a degree of economic freedom that makes marriage less necessary, resulting an estrangement between man and his wife.

### *Leave It to Me*

Mukherjee's fifth novel *Leave It to Me* (1997) reveals the protagonist's ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents. It also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional topics by the main character in her quest for revenge. This work continues the theme of immigration. The story also includes a character called "guru" who has the dubious distinction of leaving behind a trail of used and abused women, illegitimate children, rapes and murders across the Indian subcontinent. An unwanted female child is dropped like a hot brick at the nearest orphanage, where she is called Faustine. The child was later adopted but an Italian-American family and christened as Debby Di Martino.

Despite the love and affection of her foster family, Debby grows up with the awareness of being different, the feeling that she is an unwanted obstacle in a word that hurtles on towards its mysterious destination. The feeling is sometimes a haunting loneliness, when everyone is surrounded by love while one is feeling alone.

### CONCLUSION

Mukherjee's novels show the change in her work from a primary concern with the Indian expatriates' experience in the new society to a situation where the expatriate becomes an immigrant. The expatriate is slowly assimilated into the host society – at all levels, psychological, sociological and linguistic. Her protagonists break the umbilical cord with the homeland. In *Wife* Mukherjee dramatizes the opposition between two cultures, the despair of prejudice and the pre-consciousness of immigrant status; but the psychological fragmentation, alienation, and insanity that her protagonists experience are viewed not only in terms of culture shock but also as an "intense experience of female biological, sexual and cultural castration, and a doomed search for potency".<sup>2</sup> Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* concentrate on the cultural conflict of the East and West as the protagonists take drastic steps at the end to get away from the cultural maladjustment that enmeshes them. Mukherjee's novels deal with nostalgia for a lost home, disillusionment of 'expatriation', fragmentation of the self, exuberance of immigration, assimilation, cultural translation and negotiation. Her *Desirable Daughters* marks a new trend in her writings. In her earlier novels, leaving one's native country for an alien land meant liberating oneself from the clutches of a convention-bound society. In *Desirable Daughters* the novelist acknowledges the alternate ways to belong. In addition to that, she focuses on cultural hybridity, simultaneity and the third space of enunciation which are markers of the post-colonial condition of existence. In *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee interrogates cultural essentialism and celebrates cultural hybridity. She also challenges the stereotypical notions of national identity. Tara is a cultural hybrid, who is at home in both the cultures. She has 'affiliation' with the host culture but that does not in any way hinder her 'filiation' with her homeland and native culture.

Padma is an Indo-American who believes in hyphenation. She is an Indian cultural ambassador in the United States. Parvati is a western educated Indian woman of the conventional mould. She is contended with her role as the woman of the household. These are the three distinct and different ways to belong in the new world. *The Holder of the World* has the theme of sexual awakening through another lover. This theme can be seen in *Wife*, "The Lady from Lucknow" and in "A wife's story". It is conveyed through Hannah Easton's relationship with the Raja of Devghat in *The Holder of the World*. This novel criticizes canonical American literature's white centredness, by forcing the recognition of the immigrant experience and the multi-cultural aspects to American history. Hannah, who returns to America as Hester, brings with her Black Pearl, the daughter of Hannah and Jadav Singh. Black Pearl is Indo-American; her very existence signifies the merging of cultures.

The novel inserts immigrant culture and history into the American canon. In it, Mukherjee is claiming a place within the canon of American literature for immigrant writers like herself. It is in this sense that she sees herself as an American writer; by calling herself American. She is not naively adopting an alien identity but is refusing a hyphenated existence as an Indo-American writer. On the road to becoming immigrants', the novelist feels her protagonists have to try out new identities and this often necessitates the death of their former selves. This is her artistic way of showing the psychic damage that often takes place as immigrants change and adapt. In the earlier novels, especially in *Jasmine* this change was brought about through violence since her immigrant characters often suffer dislocation as they grab at the change to reinvent themselves in the new world. This phenomenon is connected to the diaspora, and the transplanting of people from one nation to another. However, in *Desirable Daughters*, this diasporic violence is absent as by now the concept of the immigrant protagonist has already matured, and Mukherjee no longer finds it necessary to portray the angst of the transplanted individual.

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