
INDIAN DIASPORA: DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract: The Paper entitled "Indian Diaspora: Diasporic Consciousness in the Novels of Bharathi Mukherjee" immigrant sensibility, sense of belongingness and nostalgia. The novels taken for the study are *The Tiger's Daughter*(1971), *Wife*(1975), *Jasmine*(1989), *The Holder of the World*(1993), *Leave It To Me*(1997), *Desirable Daughters*(2002), *The Tree Bride*(2004).

Introduction: Diasporic Literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken on account of economic compulsions. Basically Diaspora is a minority community living in exile. William Safran points out that the term Diaspora can be applied to expatriate minority communities whose members share some of the common characteristics such as: "they or their ancestor have been dispersed from a special original 'centre' or two or more 'peripheral' of foreign regions ; they retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland- its physical location, history and achievements ; they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would (should) eventually return- when conditions are appropriate; they believe they should collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland and its safety and prosperity; and they continue to relate, personally and vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethno-communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship..." (Safran William)

Bharathi Mukherjee's own life, with its dislocations and displacements, explains her compulsive interest in recording the immigrant experience in her fiction. Her experiences in India, Canada and America have left an indelible mark in her sensibility as a person and also as an artist. Mukherjee says in her interview with Chen and Goudie:

I describe myself in terms of ethno-nationality; I'd say I am an American writer of Bengali-Indian origin. In other words, the writer/political activist in me is more obsessed with addressing issues of minority discourse in the U.S. and Canada, the two countries I have lived and worked in over the last thirty odd years [...] At this moment my Calcutta childhood and adolescence offer me intriguing, incompletely-comprehended revelations about my hometown, my family, my place in that community: the kind of revelations that fuel desire to write an autobiography rather than to mythologize an Indian national identity. (3)

This reveals a person's changing perception about oneself, in the diaspora. Mukherjee constantly exhorts the readers to renegotiate the immigrants' homeland. She writes in the tradition of the immigrant experience rather than the nostalgia of expatriation. Mukherjee in all her works brings out the heterogeneity of this immigrant experience.

As Mukherjee has travelled widely, she invariably talks about exile, expatriation, assimilation, immigration, and cultural negotiation. Her writing begins in exile, moves on to expatriation, then to assimilation, and later to translation and cultural hybridity. There are novels like *Wife* and *Leave It to Me* which deal with disillusionment and fragmentation brought about by the immigrant experience. In *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* there is a further widening of immigrant experience. Bharathi Mukherjee's fiction depicts the cross-cultural crisis faced by her women in her novels. She found herself difficult to adapt to the culture, customs and traditions, which she depicts through her female protagonists cultural crisis. Identity is an important issue in diasporic literature. Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity and Diaspora* contends that 'identity' should not be thought of as an accomplished fact, but should be seen as a production which is never complete. This view problematises the authenticity of the term 'cultural identity'.

Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*(1971) deals with an upper caste Bengali Girl named Tara Banerjee Cartwright, who goes to America for higher studies. This study throws light on the cross-cultural conflict of the 22yrs old heroine when she revisits India after a seven year stay in United States. It highlights the cultural turmoil faced by Tara when she refuses to accept Calcutta as her home again. This study also analyses how Tara, caught in a gulf between the two contrasting worlds, leads to her illusion, depression, and finally her tragic end in a violent incident. The author also attempts to portray how the novelist herself intimately projects her own self through the heroine in this novel.

Mukherjee's Second Novel *Wife*(1975) suggests that Dimple's loss of sanity may be attributed to her sense of alienation from her own and American Culture;

she doesn't understand the latter, and neither seems to accommodate her. Dimple's sense of loss is heightened by her seduction by Amit's friend, a moral lapse that is as inimical to her status and self identity as it is insidious to her role as a wife. Her sense of her own subservience reiterates her marginality, which is further compounded by her continuing frustration in adjusting to her new environment and new experiences. Her descent into madness, in the final analysis, is to be seen as both an affirmation and a denial of her identity as a victim of cultural displacement and patriarchal discourse. Mukherjee implies that Dimple's 'Madness' has inevitably altered her status and her identity. By acting out her repression, Dimple transforms her marginality—her silence into action, which enables her, if only briefly, to move from the cultural and ideological periphery to the centre.

Mukherjee has explored her theme with its many nuances. The transformation of *Jasmine* (1989) her third novel from a semi-educated Punjabi rustic to an American is convincing. Perhaps Mukherjee's purpose of bringing to the contemporary American fiction, the reality of the experiences of the floating elements in American society, the immigrant who are trying to establish themselves, is fulfilled. It is not easy to overcome the "aloofness of expatriation" or disunite oneself from the roots and tradition of the culture that one comes from. Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, who make a life time for every name, look like a possibility for every enthusiastic immigrant. Thus caught between the two cultures of the east and west, past and present, old and new, Jasmine constantly "Shuttles" in search of a concrete identity.

In her fourth novel *The Holder of the World* (1993) it is Hannah Easton, a white Puritan woman from Salem, Massachusetts Bay Colony who makes a journey to the exotic Coromandel shores in the late seventeenth century and finally becomes the mistress of an Indian potentate, Raja Jadhav Singh. Also as we move in two time spans, three centuries apart, Bharati Mukherjee attempts to give her novel a greater complexity and depth. She draws the reader's attention to the in-terconnectedness between cultures and lands and goes so far as to establish a claim that Hannah's life might have served as a model for the story of Hester Prynne which is told by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*

In *Leave It To Me* (1997) Mukherjee says about 23yrs old Debbie, despite having a stable home in Schenectady, New York, and loving adoptive parents, has never adjusted to the fact that she was abandoned by her birth parents. She yearns to uncover her true origins, but all she can find out from the Dimartinos is that they adopted her from an Indian orphanage run by nuns and that she is the

daughter of a Californian hippy mother and an Indian father. Debbie's image of her biological parents is anything but sentimental. Debbie finds herself drawn to the West Coast in search of her long – lost mother. As she crosses the continent, she transforms herself into Devi Dee, a young hustler with an affinity for unsavory father figures, In *Leave It To Me* she brilliantly weaves a profusion of disparate viewpoints into an elegant and lucid whole. Bharathi Mukherjee, time and again has revealed the sensibilities of the immigrants in her works. This novel *Leave It to Me* assiduously focus on the angst and exuberance of characters. The retrospective journey of Debbie is to find the origins of her psyche, to bring about an appeasement with the past and the present, glorifying the future. This novel explores and reveals the alien environs and culture of America in a more congenial socio-economic and political milieu. It focuses on the reinvented culture of America.

In *Desirable Daughters* (2002) Mukherjee enmeshes the socio-cultural history of Bengal, blending it with personal family history, which is transmitted down the generations. She traces the earliest influence of colonialism and the impact of western culture on ethnic Bengali society, bringing it up to her present in America, when immigrant have differential circumstances, and a differential identity. This paper seeks to analyse how Tara, the narrator of the novel comes to terms with her history and legacy from which she is almost separated. Yet it is a part of her psyche, and the physical journeys that she undertakes between the U.S and India, are also psychological journeys. Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters* is mainly concerned with roots of identity. She deeply probes into the working of the human mind and how it brings out shades and nuances involved in the depiction of the fabric of life. Bharathi is almost a kind of American in outlook and her interest in information the technology westernizes her attitude to life. But Tara is a typically Indian Easterner longing for her inner roots. Tara's son Rabi brings himself in line with the post-colonial tradition of gay culture. The settlement of Bish in America creates a predicament which is intensely diasporic. Bish is quite at home with foreign culture. This illustrates the novelist's leading principle that when one inherits nothing, he is entitled to everything. She also takes up other serious issue that goodness in human nature has nothing to do with the particular locale or region. Bharati Mukherjee's *Tree Bride* (2004), is a sequel to *Desirable Daughters*. The protagonist, Tara chatterjee, is the savvy, cosmopolitan wife of a Silicon Valley magnate who is happy with her privileged life in the 'gated community'. The *Tree Bride* is a story within a story. Mukherjee weaves at least four stories together, connecting the lives of Tara Lata Gangooly

(*The Tree Bride*) and her great-great niece, Tara chatterjee; Tara's gynecologist Dr. Victoria Khanna and her grandfather Vertie Treadwell, who was a colonial officer; John Mist, a British Orphan who established Mistigunj in East Bengal and Abbas Sattar Hai, the leader of the Indian mafia. These stories tell of the magic of 'Convergence', how each person we meet can, impact our lives. In other words, *The Tree Bride* moves back and forth in time and across continents in order to locate the connections and convergences and not mere coincidences of the past and present.

Mukherjee says where immigrants do not merely assimilate; they change the land much as the land changes them. The traditional distance between author, text and reader is constantly breached in Mukherjee's fiction, such that one is always haunted by Mukherjee's shadow behind her characters, and ghosts of her character behind her "realistic" prose. Thus while, as some critics have pointed out, Mukherjee's fiction is repetitive of her diasporic predicament, it is equally true that each of her works and characters is balanced just a little differently on the abyss of dislocation. Mukherjee can be read as a psychoanalyst of culture and a champion of the voiceless, and each of her characters serves a model of representation of human caprice caught in a moment of self-preservation glimpsing the horror of difference.

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indo-American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvas. Her novels honestly depict the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement (alienation) from her land of origin to Canada where she was "simultaneously invisible" as a writer and "over exposed" as a racial minority and her final relocation (assimilation) to U.S.A. as a naturalised citizen. For the writer the dilemma of belongingness

in her novels is a matter of flux and agony, which explores the problem of nationality, location identity and historical memory in Canada.

It also aims to explore her sense of alienation in Canada where life as an immigrant was unbearable, that forced her to make an effort towards the process of economic, social and cultural adjustment. The cultural shock no doubt is vividly revealed in all her characters.

It portrays the protagonist's physical social and psychological isolation from the society and the immigrant community. The characters feel that their identity is left hanging in the air and they remain aloof. The very characteristic of diasporic writing is the alienation, rootlessness and so on. Whereas the colonised feels alienated in his own land, the diasporic feels that the land is not his own. For the diasporic, the transplantation of the self creates problems. All these results in the characters latent aggression and mental imbalance.

It also deals with the bitter experiences of the migrants as they move between two worlds and grapple with cultural displacement. The theme of identity in Mukherjee's novels and the dichotomy in her attitude to her homeland and the paradoxes and the contradictions in the immigrant psyche are also traced in this chapter. Her later writing is more at ease with new identities and displays no undue need to recapture her Indianness as more and more she gets assimilated with the American milieu.

The gulf between expatriation and assimilation is the major theme of her novels. As an expatriate she experiences the dilemma of her identity. Placing Mukherjee's novels as an expatriate experience, we find several clearly pronounced themes such as adjustment to a new society, job-hunting, frustrations, shattering of a dream.

References:

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