

Negotiating identity, assimilation, and multicultural consciousness in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract:

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction is an important part of diasporic and multicultural literature due to the very strong depiction of immigration, assimilation, cultural conflict and identity transformation. Her novels and short stories vividly depict the lives of South Asian immigrants, especially Indian women, who grapple with the social and cultural environments they find themselves in when they are away from home. The paper explores Mukherjee's approach to immigration and multiculturalism in some of her selected books including *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine*. The study is focused on the psychological implications of displacement, the crisis of identity and the assimilation aspect of immigrant characters that are situated between the East and the West. In this work, Mukherjee introduces the subject of immigration as both a problem and a chance for transformation, as people find themselves in multiple identities in multicultural societies. Her works also condemn "cultural purity" and advocate for "hybridity," "fusion," and "cross-cultural adaptation. With a dynamic and transformative portrayal of the immigrant experience, Mukherjee is in a position to redefine the concept of the American identity and focus on the contributions immigrants made to multicultural societies. The paper concludes that Mukherjee's fiction is a celebration of resilience, adaptability and cultural fusion, but also of the emotional and social complexities of diaspora life.

Keywords: Immigration, Assimilation, Multiculturalism, Cultural Transformation, Identity Crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee has achieved significant literary acclaim as a distinguished author in Asian American Literature, Canadian Multicultural Literature, and as an expatriate Indian woman writer in English, as well as in Indian Diaspora Literature, within a short timeframe. She is regarded as one of the most prominent current immigrant or expatriate writers of Bengali ancestry residing in America. She was born on 27 July 1940, in Ballygunge, the suburb of Calcutta in higher social classes of the Bengali Brahmin society and daughter of Sudhir Lai and Bina Banerjee. Her father was a successful drug dealer and had an enormous family consisting of about fifty family members in a large property. Her mother was a homemaker.

She was the second daughter among the trio of girls born to their parents. At the age of eight, she had already perused countless works by Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Maxim Gorky, in addition to Bengali classics.

The subject came to Europe with her parents after the independence was achieved and came back to Calcutta in the early 1950s. She attended secondary education in the Loreto School. In the year 1959 she received her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Calcutta and later developed a Masters of Arts in 1961 at the University of Baroda. She then went to the United States where she studied in major courses in the University of Iowa. In 1963, she won a Master of Fine Arts at the Iowa Writers Workshop and in 1969, a Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature. In 1963, she got married to Clark Blaise who was also a student. She passed away on 28 January 2017. Bharati Mukherjee was an American author of Indian descent. Her fictional masterwork mostly and obsessively addresses the challenges faced by South Asian immigrant women, particularly those of Indian descent. In her novels and short stories, she realistically points the contemporary American immigrant and expatriate social reality. She articulately delineates the plight of Indian women who go to the new world, where civilizations converge into a contemporary existence rife with turmoil and aggression.

The present paper is an attempt to discuss the issues of immigration, assimilation, multiculturalism and cultural transformation in the chosen writings of Bharati Mukherjee. It explores Mukherjee's presentation of the lives of South Asian immigrants who are attempting to navigate between the cultures from which they come and the cultures they occupy in the West. The study especially investigates the psychological struggles, racial discrimination, cultural alienation, and identity crisis of immigrant women in books like *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, and *Jasmine*. The paper also delves into Mukherjee's notions of cultural hybridity and the rejection of cultural barriers in terms of assimilation and multicultural fusion. This study focuses on the evolution of her characters and her perspective of America as a multicultural, living space that is defined by immigrants, in order to emphasize Mukherjee's role in diasporic literature and her themes of America as a space defined by immigrants' experiences.

THE GLIMPSE OF IMMIGRATION IN THE WORKS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

Most of her works include autobiographical elements. The subtle sections of her writings can be traced back to the life path and the personal history of Mukherjee who admittedly states this in an interview. Being a diasporic writer, she breaks down the experiences of women who move back and forth in an eastern and western situation. The author has undergone many phases of

immigration, identity crises, and racial prejudice, confronting these challenges both as a female writer and as a South Asian individual. Mukherjee has undergone several modifications, emerging anew with each one. She passed through a joint family during her teenage years; she later moved to a nuclear family and finally she moved to the United States, thus leading to the imposition of the ex-pats, migrant and citizens. Bharati Mukherjee in her work *Days and Nights* in Calcutta outlines this development.

Tiger's Daughter: As a first-mover the character of Tara of her work *Tiger Daughter* is representative of what Mukherjee has depicted about herself. This book was written at the time of Mukherjee being expatriated, when she grappled with her identity in a foreign nation while maintaining ties to her past. The tale centers on a 15-year-old girl who travels to America for her further education. At this stage in life, she has to meet several challenges and cannot easily integrate into American society and its cultural milieu. The racial biases have a tremendous power over her. She finally gets into a love affair and marries an American citizen called David Cartwright in America. The socio-cultural hindrances are compounded in the post marriage where she struggles to compromise conflicting cultural demands.

Wife: The second novel published by Mukherjee, called *Wife* is a depiction of a Bengali girl, whose father is in the middle-class background and is named Dimple, who gets married to Amit Basu, a consultant engineer. Dimple presents her marriage opportunities as possibly becoming a match to someone in the profession like a neurosurgeon or an architect, who would probably afford her more freedom of expression. Dimple keeps on complaining about her body shape citing an underdeveloped mammary tissue and sitar-shaped shape. Mr. Dasgupta, the father of Dimple, said that he felt fatigued because of the lengthy process of finding an appropriate suitor, "No one would wed an unattractive girl like her; no one would provide her happiness or treat her with dignity" (Mukherjee, *Wife* 10). Finally, he had discovered the name of Amit Kumar Basu who had applied in Canadian and U.S. nations to immigrate. The period of expatriation is part of the novel, *Wife*. Dimple is moving to the United States with her husband in the quest to develop her dreams in the country.

Jasmine: As published in 1989, Bharati Mukherjee novel *Jasmine* fits temporally with the immigrant experience that the author had undergone. The main protagonist is a woman named Jasmine and this woman belongs to the feudal village of Hasnapur in Punjab and she comes to America after her husband dies. Jasmine, the subject in question, has undergone several identity shifts, that is, Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane, in different geographical locus such as Punjab,

Florida, New York, Iowa, and California. This transformation of the country woman, Jyoti, to the self-confident, life-assertive character of Jasmine came only when she visited the United States. She actively denies a victimhood position and eliminates the element of offense. Having no material possessions serves as an advantage, as it allows her to demonstrate an adaptive ability, which is chameleon-like in response to the unfamiliar cultural environment, thus becoming a slave to traditional limiting factors associated with caste, religion, and sexuality. She chooses not to be marginalized in the American context deliberately and goes out of the secure home of Devendra Vadhera, the predecessor of the deceased husband.

ASSIMILATION AND CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION IN MUKHERJEE'S FICTION

Bharati Mukherjee intertwines fiction and personal experience to illuminate the quintessential theme of diaspora in *Jasmine*. She not only addresses the issues encountered by the immigrant community but also skillfully highlights a positive view on immigrants and their experiences in America. Bharati Mukherjee illustrates the distinctiveness of her perspectives compared to other diasporic authors by presenting many facets of her subject. Jasmine in "Jasmine" has acute perceptiveness; she assumes several identities to adapt to her environment and hide her own nature. She clarifies the connection between hybridity and assimilation to illustrate modern diasporic culture. This becomes more apparent as America evolves into a confluence of cultures. This research clarifies how the protagonist's developing conscience corresponds with the altered immigrant experience, cultivating a favorable view of the 'foreign' experience. *Jasmine* assumes many identities to accomplish her objectives. Prakash serves as the catalyst for her first identity transformation, with her fervor encompassing a convoluted odyssey spanning three continents. In the subsequent identity transformation, the individual in question is Half-Face, who assaults her and perpetrates a violent rape. Unable to tolerate his impudent behavior, she fatally stabs him and departs. Her intrinsic Indian culture transforms her death want into a survival instinct, prompting her to respond to violence with murder. Hybridity is synonymous with assimilation in diasporic discourse. The migrant must disengage from the problems stemming from the convergence of several cultural groups and assimilate into the prevailing culture of the host region. *Jasmine* views her experiences as significant difficulties, fluctuating between the past and the present in her quest for a self-directed future. *Jasmine* seeks to avoid being seen as an inferior migrant-turned-citizen. She aims to cultivate self-assertiveness and assimilate into the distinctive American culture and history. Her path embodies the archetypal American ideal. She descends into the abyss of depravity and

contends with misfortunes. However, this fortifies her resolve and persuades her to abandon her intention of ritual suicide in order to pursue the 'country of opportunity.' By killing Half-Face to revenge her sexual attack, she is effectively eliminating her restricted or uncertain mindset in favor of a resolute resolve.

The introduction of her Indian husband Prakash is characterized by his influence in Punjab's political arena: "I fell in love with that voice." It was profound, grave, and perceptive. "I was prepared to marry the man who had that voice" (66) and further asserts, "only an extraordinarily tall and exceptionally robust man could possess a voice like that." Her marriage is characterized by its unique nature: "Ours was a no dowry, no guests, Registry Office wedding." 75 The protagonist's conscience may be examined via her developing imagery and identity crisis. A multitude of Mukherjee's female characters have a propensity for American materialism. Jasmine is not an anomaly. Bharati Mukherjee's objectives are explicit: "I am, in fact, writing more about Americans than about dark-complexioned immigrants." My focus is on the nation's ongoing evolution. My novels explore the interplay between mainstream American culture and the emerging culture influenced by migration. I am explicitly discussing the merging of two civilizations. Many expatriate writers are hindered by their duality; I, however, see it as rewarding. *Jasmine* is considered the pioneering work of Bharati.

THE CHAOS OF THE MELTING POT: MULTICULTURALISM IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S FICTION

Among the pioneering novelists of the diasporic Indian literary genre, Bharati Mukherjee has made a name for herself. Her description of the diaspora and its impact on women gives readers a glimpse into the life of South Asians living in the US today. The objective of this article is to investigate how Bharati Mukherjee's novels and short tales represent the instability of the Melting Pot and the experiences of Indian immigrants in America. The struggle to decide whether to live in the West or return home to the safety and comfort of their own culture is unique to people born in the third world. It is simple to change citizenship, but it is difficult to change cultures.

A recurring theme in Mukherjee's writing is multiculturalism. A policy known as multiculturalism highlights the distinctive qualities of the various cultures found throughout the world. It is a method of managing cultural diversity in a multiethnic society through public policy that formally emphasizes tolerance and respect for cultural variations within a nation's boundaries. Mukherjee has taken a moderate stance in recent discussions over

multiculturalism. On the one hand, she disagrees with the cultural isolation of every nation and ethnicity where people want to prove their regions and refuse to be tied by any of the cords or American identity. However, she disapproves of the Melting Pot metaphor, which argues that representatives of ethnic minorities should integrate their personalities in the Euro-American cultural environment.

Mukherjee has little interest in the emotive parts of cultural preservation, traditionalism, or ties to the past. As her characters travel from one culture to another, they experience personal transformations. Her main characters deal with a multicultural culture and demonstrate a keen understanding of the social reality in which they live. They battle for a new life but do not completely break away from the old as a result of the multi-cultural ethos they encounter. Mukherjee writes about the lives and experiences of people who are rootless and face cultural contradictions. Today, cultural alienation is a global issue. A person's former values collide with the new ones when they transfer from their own culture to another. In Mukherjee's world, cultural encounters no longer only result in conflicts, miscommunications, and uncertainty, but rather in an acceptance of diversity where cross-culturality serves as the endpoint.

While "assimilation," Acculturation or the acquisition of changes in exterior behaviour starts early enough even though the amount of time it takes to respond intuitively and emotionally to a culture is a much slower process. The first stage in adapting to a new environment is absorption.

According to Adrienne Rich's assimilation hypothesis, "to assimilate means to give up not only your history but also your body, to try to adopt an alien appearance because your own is not good enough, to fear naming yourself lest name be twisted into label." (Rich, 142).

One's actual identity is not destroyed by assimilation. Conversely, it is about the vast blending of cultural influences that make up the American experience. The fusion process, as staged by Mukherjee in her works, especially in such novels as *Desirable Daughters* and *Jasmine*, is one of the most important subjects of her narrative technique, is best described by the term "mongrelization." A spontaneous, passionate merger of different things is suggested by the term "mongrelization." Mukherjee welcomes "cultural and psychological mongrelization" with joy. Mukherjee gives an image of a future in which a population of Americans might be freshly amalgamated, a global merger of diverse cultures and self. She underlines the importance of merging or fusing civilizations. She criticizes the archaic image of America as a "melting pot," which entails the loss of the old self and the birth of a new one. Instead, she

wants to replace the idea with what she refers to as the "fusion chamber," in which the inflow of immigrants simultaneously affects and is affected in new ways by the American (or receiving) culture. Mukherjee's characters exhibit the vitality, dynamism, and tenacity essential for navigating the challenges required for survival and cultural transformation in a twentieth-century global context. In an interview, Mukherjee articulated that the stream of immigrants serves as a revitalizing and formative force in American life.

CONCLUSION

Bharati Mukherjee's fiction provides a deep analysis of the issues of immigration, assimilation, multiculturalism and identity transformation in today's global scenario. Her novels capture the emotional conflicts, cultural clashes, and psychological quandaries of immigrants as they seek to make a home in new countries while also maintaining ties to their old ones. In the characters of Tara, Dimple, and Jasmine, Mukherjee illustrates how migration can be a life-changing experience and how it transforms one's identity, values, and worldview. The themes of Mukherjee's works include the challenges of assimilation in multicultural societies such as racial discrimination, alienation, loneliness, and cultural dislocation. Meanwhile, her stories convey strength, flexibility, and re-imagining oneself. Mukherjee's writing on immigration is in contrast to many diasporic writers, who tend to emphasize mostly nostalgia and loss, as a means of personal growth and cultural transformation. Her idea of "hybrid" and "cultural fusion" is grounded in the idea of "cultural fusion" – which rejects notions of cultural purity – and celebrates the mixing of different traditions and identities. In addition, Mukherjee's characterizations of immigrant women are about the quest for independence and self-definition in a patriarchal and cross-cultural framework. Her female protagonists defy social norms and try to forge purposeful selves in out-of-place settings. Defying the conventional concept of the "melting pot," Mukherjee calls for a more comprehensive model of cultural cohabitation by portraying America as an ever-changing multicultural nation, with immigrants as its defining feature. Overall, Bharati Mukherjee's fiction continues to be a significant body of work in diasporic and multicultural literature due to its realistic depiction of immigrants' lives and its focus on cultural change, hybridity and human resilience. Her works continue to provide valuable insights into the complexities of identity, belonging, and adaptation in an increasingly globalized world.

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