

# A Study of Cultural Shock in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels

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**Abstract –** This paper tries to capture the main reason, the quintessential concept behind the dilemma of all the heroines of her novels. Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer whose preoccupation is dealing with the problems and issues related to South Asian Women, particularly India, though she claims that her feelings are more like those of the women of North America. She differs from other writers in the way she deals with her heroines (Indian women immigrants), predominantly with their cultural shock that that overthrows them in life directly or indirectly. This is illustrated very clearly by Tara Banerjee in 'The Tiger's Daughter', Dimple in 'Wife', Jyoti in 'Jasmine' and Devi in 'Leave it to me', three sisters - Padma, Parvathi and Tara in 'Desirable Daughters' and Tara in 'The Tree Bride'. Though the heroines are described as bold and assertive, they do not escape from this particular behavior born of 'culture shock'. They have the strong potentiality for adaptability; they stand on firm ground to change their lives really, if necessary, and/or accept the bitter truth of their lives anyhow.

**Keywords:** South Asian Women, Cultural shock, Women immigrants, Feminist writer

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indian born (Bengali) writer Bharati Mukherjee is one of the popular Indian writers in English from America. The immigrant writers are of two categories. First come the "Willing Immigrant Writers" who are settled in America from Europe and Asia and who have made it their home. The second category consists of the "Unwilling Immigrant Writers" (Banerjee 1993) of American origin whose forefathers were brought to America in some slave ships. But Bharati Mukherjee has gone on record saying that she considers herself an American writer, and not an Indian expatriate writer. In an 1989 interview with Amanda Meer, Mukherjee said: "I totally consider myself an American writer, and that has been my big battle: to get to realize that my roots as a writer are no longer, if they ever were, among Indian writers, but that I am writing about the territory about the feelings, of a new kind of pioneer here in America. I'm the first among Asian immigrants to be making this distinction between immigrant writing and expatriate writing. Most Indian writers prior to this, have still thought of themselves as Indians, and their literary inspiration, has come from India. India has been the source, and home. Whereas I'm saying, those are wonderful roots, but now my roots are here and my emotions are here in North America."

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

In the complex fabric of contemporary Indian civilization, the two most easily discerned strands are the indigenous Indian traditions and the important European conceptions. Almost every educated Indian today is the product of the conflict and reconciliation of two cultures, although the consciousness of this tension varies from individual to individual. What is generally true of the Indian writer, because a writer is concerned with the springs of human action and with the motivation behind human behaviour. Thus, he is more aware than others of the elements that makes up his personality. At the present point of Indian history, a writer's analysis of his self necessarily involves the evaluation of his own attitude towards these two aspects of his being-one inherited from birth, the other imbibed through education.

The process of migration to foreign countries that started in mid nineteenth century has a new height in terms of immigration population within a span of one hundred years. People from all over the world are drawn towards this country for a variety of reasons. Notwithstanding their intention, those who choose to stay on and finally settle down, experience qualitative cultural transformation, which with men of letters get appropriated in their works Bharati Mukherjee creative world best manifests immigrant experience

which can be advantageously analyzed in the light of the making her artist.

Culture is too vast and baffling a term to be precisely defined in a few pages. Several sociologist, anthropologists, historians and men of letters have tried to define culture from time to time. However.. the most comprehensive interpretation comes from T .S. Eliot, one of the profounder of modernist movement. Even he seems to be different and he calls his treatise *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. In the first paragraph of introduction, "My aim is to help to a word, the word culture". He initiates his discussion on culture and its ingredients with a simple proposition "Culture may even be described simply as that which makes life worth living," Thus, Eliot sees culture as the way of life, as one, which affects us as is affected, in turn by our activities. He believes that culture is ideally a whole way of "life, lived commonly and variously by a whole people. N .A. Nikam in his attempt to define culture quotes a translated verse from Kathopanisad: 'In the quest of the imperishable (the good) that one choose is his.' Thus, culture, according to him, is a quest for good but it is not good if the quest is not free choice. The quest and the choice are, therefore, the two ingredients of culture and the tradition is formed by the culmination of centuries of history, or tradition may be defined as a "passage in which there is both persistence and renewal. So culture concepts are both ancient and contemporary, traditional as well as modern".

### Bharati's Heroines and Their Role:

This culture conflict-or synthesis, as the case may behas for some reason always assumed a vital significant for the Indian novelist who writes in English. The women characters in Mukherjee's fiction are moored to their Indian origins the same way the author is Like her, they shed their external commotions with India. They culturally disintegrate themselves from India but carry a core of beliefs in the interior of the self against which all new experience is measured. The Indianness of Bharati Mukherjee is described in the attributes she gives to her fictional characters. The entrants through America's half open door of immigration laws juggle for a place in an unfamiliar though desired world. Their strategic ploys, resilience, willingness to shed the old, don the new; make the stuff of Mukherjee's novels. What part of the Indianness is restrained through the adoptive process remains to be seen. And in what way, if any, do the immigrants broaden the horizons of American experience in another point for consideration. She says: I see my 'immigrant' story replicated in a dozen American cities, and instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse, a 'visible' disfigurement to be hidden), I see it as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated.'

Bharat's heroines, however, are immigrants and undergoing cultural shock, but they try to stand strong with their own identity or individuality. This may be the reason for Bharati Mukherjee to have had significant attention, getting both positive and negative criticism from all corners of the literary world. Though she claims that she writes of expatriates with the feeling of a North American, she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views. She portrays women characters as the victims of immigration, and yet actually the problems are not caused, because they are immigrants, but because the women characters fight for their rights as women and then as individuals just as the other feminist writers' heroines.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. *The Tiger's Daughter* reflects the artist's personal experiences as a woman caught between two cultures. This is an interesting study of an upper class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies. Though afraid of the unknown ways of America for in the beginning she tries to adjust herself to it by entering into the wedlock with an American. She returns to India after seven years, only to find herself a total stranger in the inherited milieu. She realizes that she now neither Indian nor truly American. She is totally confused and lost.

*The Tiger's Daughter* is a story of Tara a young Indianborn woman who, like the writer, returns to Calcutta, after having spent seven years in the United States, to visit her family, and discovers a country quite unlike the one she remembered. She becomes painfully aware that while she has not yet eased herself into American culture, she no longer derives sustenance from values and mores of her native land. Memories of genteel Brahmin life-style are usurped, by the new impressions of poverty, hungry children and political unrest. *A Times Literary Supplement* reviewer notes, "Tara's westernization has opened her eyes to gulf between the two worlds that still make India the despair of those who govern it."

The actual starting point of the story dates back to a rainy night in the year' 1879. It was the day of the grand wedding ceremony of the daughters of Hari Lal Banerjee, the 'Zamindar' of Village Pachapara. Standing under a wedding canopy on the roof of his house Hari Lal Banerjee could have hardly imagined what future holds in store for his coming generations, He "did not hear the straining and imprisoned ghost of change," Because:

"The shadows of suicide or exile, of Bengali soil sectioned and ceded, of workers rising against their bosses could not have been divined by even a wise man in those days."

After the marriage of Hari Lal Banerjee's daughters, life continued to be pleasant in the village Pachapara many more marriages took place and many deaths too. After two summers Hari Lal Banerjee fell a prey to an unseen assassin while mediating a feud. All the reputation and influence of Banerjee family died with him. Nobody knew at that time that "years later a young woman who had never been to Pachapara would grieve for the Banerjee family and try to analyse the reasons for its change. She would sit by a window in America to dream of Hari Lal, her great-grandfather, and she would wonder at the gulf that separated him from her".

Tara's husband David Cartwright is wholly Western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She cannot communicate with him the finer nuances of her family background and of life in Calcutta. Her failure to do so is rooted in their cultural differences. In India a marriage is not simply a union of two individuals, it is coming together of two families as well. But in Western countries like America, a marriage is simply a contract between two individuals. David is hostile to genealogies and often mistakes her love for family for over dependence. He asks naive questions about Indian customs and traditions and she feels completely insecure in an alien atmosphere because 'Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner.'

Although her fiction has shown a discernible movement towards Americanization is in style as well as in protagonist's acceptance of a country that invites them to make their own rules, free from the rigid and feudalistic traditions of their native past, Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, pursues an opposite direction with the return to India of Tara, twenty two year old daughter of a wealthy and prominent Bengali Brahmin. Vassar educated Tara has married an American and has been away from home for seven years. Although she has always regarded herself as an Indian, she discovers she is more an outsider than a native, concerned with the complex and confusing web of politics, poverty, privilege and hierarchies of power and class in India. She has dreamt for years of this return, but now finds herself imbued with the 'foreignness of spirit' attributable not only to her American domicile but also to her early education in Calcutta at a private school run by Belgian nuns. Matthew Arnold's famous lines aptly describes Tara's dilemma in this novel. Wandering between two worlds/ one dead, the other powerless to be born/with nowhere to my head. Her seven-year stay at Vassar changed her outlook on life, though America did not fascinate her:

"New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels. Because girls like her, at least

almost like her, were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings. Because students were rioting about campus recruiters and for away wars rather than the price of rice or the stiffness of final exams. Because people were agitated about pollution. New York was certainly extraordinary and it had driven her to despair."

After a gap of seven years Tara plans a trip to India. For years she has dreamed of this return and thinks that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the stay abroad would be erased quite magically if she returns home to Calcutta, but it never happens. The new Americanized Tara fails to bring back her old sense of perception and views India with the keenness of a foreigner. Her entire outlook has changed. Shobha Shinde refers to this expatriate weakness, "An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it", and so does Tara in America but when she comes to confront the changed and hostile circumstances of her home country, all her romantic dreams and ideals crumble down. She realizes that she has drowned her childhood memories in the crowd of America.

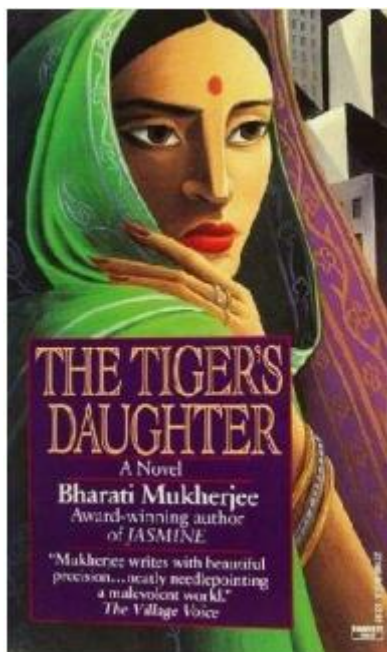
On landing at Bombay airport, her relatives greet her warmly but her response is very cold and dispassionate. When her relatives address her as 'Tultul', a nickname which they always used for her, it sounds strange to her Americanized ears. Seven years ago while on her way to Vassar "she had admired the house on Marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her". Her reaction towards the railway station is also one of despire. She "thought the station was more like a hospital; there were so many sick and deformed men sitting listlessly on bundles and trunks". In the train she happens to share her compartment with a Marwari and a Nepali. She thinks that both will "ruin her journey to Calcutta".

**A Tantrum over Culture:** Our examination is to be searching for who the Mukerjee's characters are, especially, the heroines, whether or not they throw a tantrum over culture and its rules against the particular gender. She (Bharati Mukherjee) has always been trying to create her women as those who prepare themselves to be their own gravitational force, beyond the domination of patriarchy. Let us examine, the novels of Bharati Mukherjee based on this concept. (Banerjee, 1993).

**The Tiger's Daughter:** The Tiger's Daughter is the first novel by Bharati Mukherjee. The protagonist Tara Banerjee returns to India after a significant stay in the US. The story is of Mukherjee's own experience and might be of her siblings also, who had gone for study in America. When Tara lands at



Bombay airport, she is not comfortable with her relatives as they are not in a position to accept a woman who is not accompanied by her husband, David.



According to Indian tradition, a woman should be led by her husband. He plays a protective role. Travelling alone, living alone and moving alone are part of an unfamiliar terrain in many parts of India. In the Indian tradition, one should marry within his own caste. If anyone marries one from another caste, he/she will be treated as an outcast or a sinner. But the protagonist Tara, violating these rules, marries a foreign man who is a Jew. She totally forgets her caste and religion through her marriages. Ironically, Mukherjee criticizes the narrow-minded attitude of Indians who are crazy about foreign things and clothes, but do not approve of marriage with foreigners. In the presence of her mother, Tara feels alienated. Within herself, Tara becomes mentally disturbed and expedites her return to the USA. Thus, in the first novel one finds the feeling of alienation taking root in Tara.

**Wife:** In the Novel *Wife*, Dimple the protagonist, a typical young Bengali Girl who starts dreaming of modern life in America when she is to marry a guy – Amit Basu—who is about to settle in the US. Dimple feels that she has lost her identity in this marriage since her husband expects her to be a traditional Indian wife. Her mental agony goes unattended and untreated and finally she kills her husband and commits suicide. She resents being wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in many ways. One such way is the one including a miscarriage by skipping herself free from her pregnancy, which she views as Basu's property even in her womb. He needs her only for sexual indulgence. She feels it's some sort of guilty. (Banerjee, 1993)

**Culture Shock:** Here on track with the topic 'cultural shock', these two heroines of the novels reflect the psychic vibration called 'cultural shock'. It is to be noted that both heroines are typical Indians maybe in their minds, but tend to behave more in the western style. They struggle against these inner and outer feelings. Of course they succeed in their attempt, but it is only partial success, since both are not able to change themselves to be fully western. Dimple commits suicide and Tara becomes mentally disturbed. If they were typical western women, they would have behaved in a different manner. (Banerjee, 1993) Dimple would have gotten her divorce and Tara would have ridiculed the relatives instead of becoming mentally upset. All the heroines of Mukherjee, are of Indian roots one way or the other. It could be seen in her other novels *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and so on.

**Jyoti in Jasmine:** *Jasmine*, her third most read novel is the story of a Punjabi rural girl, Jyoti. Prakash, an energetic and enthusiastic young man enters into Jyoti's life as her husband. *Jasmine* is a typical Indian girl who gets along with Indian tradition and customs; accordingly she reacts when Prakash prepares to go to America, saying, "I'll go with you and if you leave me, I'll jump into a well". A woman has to accept, the path of her husband. Renamed as *Jasmine*, joyously sharing the ambition of her husband, she looks forward to going to America, a land of opportunities, but this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure. (Dayal, 1993) She decides to go America and fulfill Prakash's mission and perform "Sati". Having learned to "Walk and Talk" like an American, she grabs every opportunity to become American. In the end she kills Sukhawinder, the Khalsa lion who killed Prakash. After that she goes to Iowa assuming a new name "Jase". (Dayal, 1993) There are myriad roles played by *Jasmine* as Jase, and Jase abuses the power of a woman. This power could be colossal, which should have been channelized to destroy evil and fight against all ills of mankind. *Jasmine* has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. She has learnt to live not for her husband, nor for her children but for herself. *Jasmine* is a survivor, a fighter and an adaptor. She fights against unfavorable circumstances, comes out a winner and carves out a new life in an alien country.

**The Holder of the World:** Bharati Mukherjee's succeeding novel *The Holder of the World* symbolizes expatriation as a Journey of the human mind. Like *Jasmine* who travels westward, Hannah Estean's 'Voyage to the Orient' tells us about the protagonist's latest tensions, aspirations and ambitions. Hannah is born in Massachusetts and she travels to India. She becomes involved with a few Indian lovers and eventually a king who gives her a diamond known as true 'Emperor's Tear'. The story is told to the detectives searching for the diamond

from Hannah's view point. The physical journey of the female hero not only leads to probing of the self, but also makes her recognize a new side of herself. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American, but a rebel living on the fringes of society. In her next novel, 'Leave it to me', Bharati Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby Dimartino, short name Debi who seeks revenge on the parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents (described as a murderer and a flower child). The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional involvement of the chief character in her quest for revenge. (Pandya, 1990)

## CONCLUSION:

Women have experienced through marriage and/or travel abroad, tremendous physical and mental changes in their personal lives. Though they seem to be well suited for adaptability in an alien culture, the shock they go through initially is indispensable. The reason is they all are born Indian and brought up very much immersed in Indian traditions to feel and behave as custom demands, but at the same time they want to break out of it and live like western women, looking forward to it with a dreamy and tinted glass outlook. They speak of feminism and liberation easily, but stumble in living the same. This is what is found to be the main struggle in the lives of all of Mukherjee's ladies.

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