

“WE ARE JUST SHELLS OF THE SAME ABSOLUTE”: RECONFIGURED CULTURAL SPHERES OF WOMAN IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE’S SELECT NOVELS

Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj

Associate Professor, P.G. Dept. of English
S.C.D. Govt. College
Ludhiana, Punjab, India

Abstract

This paper attempts to show how immigrant female protagonists in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels try to adopt to American society and how, in consequence, are portrayed as rootless trying to reconfigure in spheres facing cultural dilemma. She writes about the female protagonists who have left their countries for various reasons and come to America with their hopes, their aspirations, their struggles, their alienation, their pain and trauma. Their native feminine sensibility and moral consciousness is at a continuous war with their hybrid surroundings. The protagonists, in Mukherjee’s novels under study, are in the transitional phase where complete freedom is not granted to them but freedom within the boundaries is given. The setting ranges from rural India to up market Manhattan. From just literates to well-educated and from modest financial backgrounds to rich, the backgrounds change, people change, countries change but the struggle remains constant as to whether women are actually liberal?

Keywords: Culture, Isolation, Homelessness, Insecurity, Identity, Nostalgia

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet...

-Rudyard Kipling

Globalization brought a drastic change in the social setup during the third quarter of Twentieth century and encouraged the phenomenon of migration, immigration and transnationalism. The scarcity of respectable and lucrative jobs on the one hand and the intense desire for liberation from traditional conservativeness on the other lured the Third World immigrants to refuge of Canada and America. Where as Divakaruni says “Pavements are silver and the roots are gold?” (Divakaruni 46). This expatriation brought with it not only geographical shift of location but also cultural dilemma. The immigrants moving between the two poles of oriental and occidental cultures have given birth to such writings which present social, cultural and psychological dualities haunting the mind and consciousness. The nostalgia of their homeland and the cultural affinities haunt the immigrants and they develop the feeling of isolation, homelessness and insecurity of existence. The diaspora community has a common memory, image, or myth about their country, including its physical location, history, accomplishments, and sufferings. The dispersed group believes they will never be totally accepted by their host society and thus feels alienated and distanced from it.

In the 1980s, there was a renaissance in creative writing, as well as a greater awareness of the country’s diversity. The beautiful works of art, fictions, and other types of creative works

depicted the new Postcolonial India with its evolving worldview, which is primarily a blend of tradition and modernization, and highlighted the East-West clash. It exemplifies the global vision of the new generation, which tries to strike a balance between inherited traditional values and assimilated foreign culture. Modern authors, who were transnational and transcontinental in nature, were successful in every way. Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Upamanyu Chatterjee are the writers of Indian fiction in English who have made bold attempts to represent post-colonial India's altered perspectives. Their use of revolutionary narrative technique has elevated their place among the writers of Indian Fiction in English.

With their powerful strides, Indian women authors are also keeping up with the world's pace. They are noted for their inventiveness, adaptability, and the distinct flavour of the soil they work in. Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, and a slew of other Indian women writers were pioneers in bringing a diverse range of indigenous Indian themes to readers, all while maintaining a strong feminist perspective. Although their creativity stretches beyond their gender, they have contributed to the field of Indian English fiction. They speak to an Indian culture that is facing social agony and cultural displacement both within and outside the country. They express the anguish of Indian immigrants who have found themselves in an unfamiliar land, full of sensations and emotions of loneliness and dislocation, with no other options for freedom on many fronts. However, the literary oeuvre they offer to the readers is astounding, and they give voice to the voiceless immigrants from all over the world.

Bharati Mukherjee, one of the most committed Indo Canadian writers, portrays her women protagonists to be caught in the conflict of two world ideologies and the prejudices of the oriental and the occidental; the East and the West. She presents the dilemma of cultural conflict and sufferings of women surviving in the multi-cultural society of America. Her works, earnestly, present the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement from her motherland to Canada where she didn't get the fame of a writer and was instead overexposed as a racial minority and her final settlement in USA. In most of her works, the dilemma of belongingness is a matter of pain and agony, which explores the problems of nationality, location, identity and historical memory in Canada.

In almost all her works e.g. *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife, Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World*, *Leave it to me*, *Desirable Daughters*, *The Tree Bride* etc., Bharati Mukherjee presents the world of immigrant through the middle class Indian women's plights, sufferings, suffocation and dilemma. In her narratives- dislocation, nostalgia, dilemma of cultural conflict and the faith in Indian moral values and personal relationship are dealt with. She brings forth her purpose in the creation of immigrant women in the following lines:

The kind of women I write about ... are those who are adaptable. We've been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to be woman's advantage when we come over as immigrants. (Connel25)

Mukherjee's female protagonists constantly suffer for their faith in religion, morality and strong bonding of personal relationships against the practicality and professionalism of American society. Through her writings, she tries to present Indian women caught in the dilemma of identities, an unresolved knot of past and present and their painful awareness of distinction between reconfigured spheres of different cultures.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* (1989) opens with 'lifetimes ago' giving us a

subtle-hint that the protagonist has to live too many lives in one lifetime. In Jasmine, Mukherjee portrays a young, humble and semi educated Punjabi Girl Jasmine who passes through the trauma of existence amid the cultural dilemma. Although named Jyoti by birth, born into a traditional family “eighteen years after the Partition Riots” (Jasmine 44), she has undergone transformation in each of her new locations, moving from Punjab to Florida to New York to Iowa and finally to California. For each new transformation, she also acquires a new name: Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane. The main backdrop of the novel is the mixing of the East and the West presented through the life of Jasmine. Bharati Mukherjee sketches the journey of Jyoti of Hasnapur to Jane of New York only for her to realize that no matter which name she takes up she is ultimately designed by nature to survive to the expectation of people around her. Only this time she takes decisions along with the responsibilities and stands for her decisions. She accepts her fate and refutes it at the same time saying, “I was nothing a speck in the solar system” (Jasmine 40) and within few lines declares herself as a sage, ready to accept her life and various changes in it as they come indifferently trying to gel with the times and most of all circumstances. The role keeps changing mostly circumstantially and fancies of people who enter in her life and take up such an important position that she has to keep changing just to adapt and adjust. She has to face tribulations and painful experiences and a life that she never expected. At many points, she is seen referring to herself in third person as goddess, Jyoti of Hasnapur or Jane Ripplemeyer. With every transition that she goes through she observes herself objectively. Kalpana Wandrekar describes about this transformation:

Jasmineto a strong independent Indo-American woman who lives mostly in the now and the present and stops worrying about the future and is indifferent to the past... (Wandrekar 125)

The freedom of change is granted to her but also weighs heavily on her mind especially when she has to take decisions about whom she has to be with. But like the proverbial phoenix, Jasmine rises from her ashes, as it were. In an interview with Carb, Bharati Mukherjee has said, “I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body, so the perspective I have about a single character’s life is different from that of an American writer who believes that he has only one life” (Carb 651). Seemingly, it is the various lives of Jasmine that Mukherjee narrates. The suffering is expressed all the more distinctively as Mukherjee has experienced the same disoriented feeling, the sense of being lost amongst her own, the sense of being chained of which there is no freedom.

Later in the novel when she reaches America and has to stay as a refugee, her liberating process of begins. The liberation, thus, then becomes a term where it has more to do with the educational status, financial freedom and social status whereas, in reality, it has to be reflected in the thoughts. Freedom here of course comes with a price. “Jyoti was now a sati-goddess, she had burned herself in a trash-can-funeral pyre behind a hoarded-up mooted in Florida” (Jasmine 176) and hence she decides to ‘travel light’ but she is never able to get over with her memories. Her adopted son Du reminds her of Prakash due to his technical capabilities “He is more like Prakash” (Jasmine 178). This further strengthens the thought that for Jane it will be difficult to get rid of her past as Jasmine.

Though the novel is set in America, the Mecca of liberty, it does not change the status of the protagonist or the mind-set of the society around her, as it speaks volumes of the current scenario. Liberty and freedom does not come free of cost but with a price tag attached to it. The Americanization of Jasmine is not her liberation though it hints at breaking of the rigid behavioural norms of the traditional Indian society. Jasmine attempts to come to terms with the two worlds-

the oriental and the occidental; one of 'nativity' and the other as an 'immigrant'. Here in this context the unity between the First and the Third World is shown to be in the treatment of women as subordinate in both countries.

It is interesting to glance briefly at Mukherjee's two earlier novels. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1973) and *Wife* (1976) too deal with the immigrant experience. Bharati's writings have presented forth a distinguishable movement towards Americanization in style as well as in protagonist's' adaptation of a country that allows them to live their own life.

The Tiger's Daughter (1973) has been rated as her elegant first novel and is considered to be written skillfully. During her interview with Sybil Steinberg, Bharati said about her first effort:

It is the wisest of my novels in the sense I was between both worlds. I was detached enough from India so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn't know America long enough to feel any conflict. (Steinberg 46)

Tara Banerjee Cartwright is the protagonist of *The Tiger's Daughter*. She is a Western-educated affluent Bengali woman who is married to an American. *The Tiger's Daughter* captures an opposite direction with the return to India of Tara, twenty-two years old daughter of a wealthy and prominent Bengali Brahmin. Tara Banerjee Cartwright goes to the United States for higher education. There she marries David, an American and settles down in New York. After her seven year-stay in the USA, Tara returns back to her home i.e. Calcutta as she wants to go to her cultural roots. She is in dire need of reclaiming her inherited identity as the daughter of Bengal Tiger and as the granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee of Pachapara and tries to pick up the threads of her old life. She moves like a shuttlecock between Calcutta and New York, bestriding Indian and American cultures.

Through her earlier childhood memories, she is unable to converse with her friends, as they are more interested in her American affluence than in her new life with her American husband. Tara returns to India after a period of seven years. Having married David Cartwright, a writer, she is now Tara Banerjee Cartwright. When she comes back to India, she finds it difficult to relate to her relatives in Bombay and Calcutta. They treat her like a foreigner. Though her parents and relatives accept her with her acquired foreignness, Tara feels a sense of insecurity. Even at home, she feels uncomfortable to play the role of a typical Bengali Brahmin as she forgets the steps followed in religious rituals. She feels out of place in the company of her Indian friends every time she meets them at the Catelli-Continental. She is a dispossessed exile in both the worlds. Though she has lived in America for seven years, married to an American and has an American passport, yet she is not keen to belong to America. She realizes that she has become rootless and out of place both in India and America. At the end, she is caught up in a violent demonstration, and the book ends with this young immigrant surrounded by different ideas and cultures.

In *Wife* (1976), Bharati Mukherjee portrays a Bengali Indian wife, Dimple Basu who is married to Amit, an engineer who has already applied for immigration to Canada and the U.S. After marriage, she also migrates to America in the anticipation of more comfortable, luxurious, glamorous and settled life, and in the hope of getting rid of the Bengali traditions where the consciousness of conventions is a hurdle to the identity and freedom of Indian woman. However, in America, Dimple's dreams shatter when she finds herself insecure, lonely and isolated in the highly technical society of America. She becomes increasingly addicted to the media, and begins to lose her sense of balance and her sense of reality. She is extremely lonely and feels cut off from everything around her. Her resistance against the multi-cultural society of America makes her

crazy to the extent that she loses control over her own conscious self and in a state of temporary insanity kills her own husband Amit.

The emotional collapse and the shattered self of Dimple is the proof of her failure to achieve 'wholeness' in alien cultural surroundings. In her marriage with Amit, a software engineer, and subsequent migration to California, she seeks the possibilities of independent life against the tradition bound life in Calcutta. However, her separation from her motherland brings isolation and loneliness in her life and generates the feeling of 'rootlessness' and casts its distressing shadows on her personal relationship. Amit's over involvement in his office work leaves Dimple discontented and nervous. The difference between Amit and Dimple is that she migrates with the values of typical Indian wife and confines all her hopes in Amit while he migrates with the dreams of professional success. In the second part of the novel, immigration and the occidental and oriental cultural dilemma determine the directions of her consciousness. Staying in California, she realizes that marriage has betrayed her by not providing her with all the glittering things she had imagined. She wants to enjoy luxury, freedom, parties and alluring male companionship but every time she is apprehensive about American ways. The dearth of command over the language, hi-tech ways of living and failure to develop alternative identity make her weak, nervous and helpless. The cultural contrast of the East and the West makes her face ridicule and humiliation. She feels how she could have survived in a country where "Every woman was a stranger, where she felt different, ignorant and exposed to ridicule in the elevator" (Wife 112). In the third part of the novel, she suffers trauma, becomes crazy to reconcile her dreams and reality.

Tara and Dimple are both essentially lonely women. It is the only way to survive, and this 'Jasmine-like' survivor obviously haunted Mukherjee, who herself survived her earlier immigrant experience in Canada. Mukherjee herself says in an interview: "there was a pattern of discrimination... I found myself constantly fighting battles against racial prejudice" (Carb 652) But in the USA, she felt relieved and free to write.

However, neither Jasmine nor The Tiger's Daughter and Wife bring across truly the pain of exile. Mukherjee has picked up the nuances of the American idiom, but her characters are marionettes performing a part. In spite of every new guise, all that changes of Jasmine are merely the exterior, there is no corresponding growth in depth and maturity. Like Jasmine, Mukherjee has changed citizenships and cultures with remarkable rapidity.

On the basis of above discussion, we can conclude that Bharati Mukherjee has very beautifully analysed cultural collision in three of her works i.e. The Tiger's Daughter, Wife and Jasmine highlighting diaspora traits such as loneliness, isolation, cultural clashes, transnationalism, internal turmoil, and hybridity. Tara, Dimple and Jasmine accept immigration as a mode of emancipation, but the adversities faced during the process of settlement thrust them in the state of oblivion in which they lose their individuality, self-respect and belongingness. The fact cannot be denied that in spite of vague view and distorted images, Bharati Mukherjee's women appear as pillars of cultural heritage. There is a large dose of Hindu philosophy thrown in as well:

"We are just shells of the same Absolute" (Jasmine15).

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