

AT A SLIGHT ANGLE TO REALITY: IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Bharati Mukherjee, like many other post-modern writers, has taken up the problems and experiences faced by the Indian immigrants in the US or the Western world. Though the writer's individual talent should be rooted in the tradition of a particular society and culture, the real strength of the modern literary imagination lies in its evocation of the individual's predicament in terms of alienation, immigration, expatriation, exile and his quest for identity. Mukherjee is one of the most significant contemporary novelist and short story writers whose writings have received world – wide recognition.

My aim in this paper is to show how the immigrants in Mukherjee's novels such as *The Tiger's Daughters*, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* try to adapt to American society and how, in consequence are portrayed as rootless. In her novels Mukherjee attempts to express the newfound identity of immigrant women who struggle to survive in an alien land. Bharati Mukherjee asserted that in an age of diasporas one's biological identity (parentage caste and creed) may not be one's real identity as emigration brings changes, physical and psychological both. Her writings contain the idea of split between desire and reason, dependent security and autonomy, social and psychic identity.

Mukherjee believes in the present not in the past, for it will help shape her future. She realized that her transformation was a two-way process because it affected both the individual as well as the national cultural identity. While other writers of migration write of a new place with a sense of loss and erosion of original culture, Bharati Mukherjee writes emphatically of gain on arrival to a new place. It is just a question of one's attitude and instinct for survival. The fact is that her women are seen not as victims of oppression, as passive spectators of the drama of history, but as having an influence and a history of their own. Through her writings Mukherjee intends to ascertain the fact that all are individuals even though each belongs to different ethnic origins. She emphasizes on the way human nature works. She writes of psychic violence and its effect on the masses. While physically she moves from Canada to America her novels shift in theme from pessimism to optimism, from racism to homelessness to a celebration of assimilations to nationalism.

The central figures in Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* fight two simultaneous battles against marginalization during their early expatriate

experiences in America; coming as they are from (an) Other world, their very identities are in question in America, calling out for a re-visioning and a re-defining at the start. The process of finding their identities must be a matter of intense struggle: with the self, with tradition, with the wonders and horrors of a new culture, with growing aspirations, hopes, and desires.

Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1927) is a fine manifestation of quest for identity. It was conceived in a very difficult phase of life when she was struggling to determine her own identity in the Indian heritage. The story of *The Tiger's Daughter* runs parallel to Bharati Mukherjee's own experience when she returned to India with her Canadian husband, Clark Blaise in 1973. She was distinctively afflicted by the chaos and impecuniosity in India as well as by the mistreatment and exploitation of women in the guise of tradition. She was distressed to perceive innocent lives tortured and dishonoured due to conventional notions of propriety and obedience.

Tara's efforts to adapt to American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion of Indian modes of life. Maya in Anita Desai's *Cry, The Peacock* finds mellifluous notes emerging from flora and fauna of Indian life. They are a relish of reality which enchant her senses. Tara's various questions about different modes of life are an attempt to communicate. The novelist's vision of life is one of rootlessness.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* reveals a more positivistic approach to the problem of immigration. *Jasmine* was written after Mukherjee migrated to the US and it is a poignant story of survival, expediency, compromises losses and adjustments involved in the process of acculturation to American life. *Jasmine* is a novel of emigration and assimilation, both on the physical and psychological levels.

Mukherjee fictionalizes the process of Americanization by tracing a young Indian woman's experience of trauma and triumph in her attempt to forge a new identity for herself. *Jasmine* moves from one family to another, builds other relationships, acquires other names, finds a shared bond with a Vietnamese refugee and finally leaves the man whose child, she is carrying to go with the man she loves choosing between the "Indian" duty and the "western" pursuit of happiness. The novel reveals the female experience of women who are self-actualizing. Quest for the definition of self and search for identity are the main features of Indian immigrant women who are caught in the flux of tradition and modernity.

Belonging to the Indian Diaspora and claiming to be an American writer, Mukherjee is seriously concerned with the issue of migrant identity and honestly believes that cultural clashes lead not to disintegration but progression. She describes the American experience as one of 'fusion' and immigration as 'a two-way process' in which there is growth for both parties. *Jasmine's* protagonist goes through such an experience (an interaction between tradition and emancipation) where she seems to be breaking from her roots in India and settling down in America.

The Desirable Daughters describes the attempt by Tara to explore her own individuality and acknowledge her difference from her two sisters her family and her community. The main focus is on Tara's quest for her identity. Till the end Tara never finds a permanent identity and a place where she belongs to throughout the novel; Tara has to face the identity crisis common to every Indian immigrant in America. Tara is a symbol of an Indian who tries but fails to integrate herself totally with the American culture, yet fights her battles courageously in order to survive in an alien land.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee contains broader perspective as the women characters are utilized, how to explore the affinity between different culture Jasmine is shuttled between her identities of two worlds both in India and America. Jasmine is portrayed as a strong woman and also she revolts against fate and conventions every juncture. She has courage to transform her dreams into reality. She is pathfinder full of self-confidence and also an example, a leader for womankind's desirous of liberation from the shackles of age-old dogmas.

Likewise Tara in *Desirable Daughters* is also drift between two lives. Tara begins to suffer from an identity crisis because of her familial ties and search for truth and security in both cultures. After many years, an American migrant alienated her from the Indian culture and traditions. She is not entirely into the western ways of life. She perceives and comprehends the gulf between the two worlds while her confusion is augmented and intensified by her own unstable self-discovery. In her novels Mukherjee attempts to express the newfound identity of immigrant women who struggle to survive in an alien land.

The novel traces the life of three Brahmin daughters, Tara, Padma, Parvati all agog to forge an identity of their own in complex socio-cultural situations. Tara, Padma and Parvati were born into a wealthy Brahmin Bengali family presided over by their fond father and a tradition-bound orthodox mother. The daughters are intelligent and artistic. They never feel bogged down or suffocated by a conventional society which has little regard for women. They rebel against this hackneyed and constraining socio-cultural set up and chart out their own course of action. Moving in different directions and different straining circumstances, each of them tries to carve out a unique identity of their own. But it is an identity in flux since all of them are ever on the go towards self-realisation and self-actualisation. Each of them tries to connect her past with the present, memory with desire. Each of them is on the move.

Mukherjee in claiming her "American" identity is rejecting the label "South Asian American" which many immigrants and second generation people from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh embrace as a political claim to solidarity. Some people reject this South Asian identity claiming that it is a mask for Indian domination in the region and it creates a homogenous regional identity where none exists (Islam242). However, what is significant is not Mukherjee's claims to South Asian identity but her seemingly naive embrace of "American." Mukherjee comments on her evolving identity as a writer and discusses an ideological change from expatriate to immigrant. The expatriate and the immigrant are important figures in Mukherjee's writing because she uses them to interrogate spatial location and dislocation. Both the expatriate and the immigrant live on the margins of American society, and as Carmen Wickramagamage has argued, Mukherjee uses this marginalized position to contest "the dominant culture's definition of center and periphery, which automatically relegate [s] America's nonwhite immigrants to a hyphenated existence on the periphery, at best" (172). However, it is not just the dominant culture's image of the hyphenated other that Mukherjee problematizes; she also interrogates the immigrant's evolving sense of self.

Thus Mukherjee's women do eventually find their distinctive voices, but not before they have battled violently with the images of their own selves as representations of "Otherness"-exotic yet silent, capable yet repressed. More often than not, these women have grown up in Indian families which, in the wake of the British Raj, amalgamated Western ideas with traditional beliefs; this often finds the young women emancipated but confused. Cultural roots retain their hold in insidious ways; though in times of fear and indecision Mukherjee's Westernized Indian women return to seek the comfort of traditional faiths, they increasingly

discover it to be cold and so the quest for a new identity continues. Apparently, Mukherjee's growing concern is that these newborn identities should not suffer from the terror of marginalization, a concern that is probably legitimate to immigrants everywhere.

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