

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

R. Annie Vidhya
Assistant Professor
Department Of English
Voorhees College,
Vellore

This Paper entitled "Diasporic Consciousness in the selected novels of Bharathi Mukherjee" aims to explore the delination of diasporic factors such as cultural conflict, alienation, identity crisis, immigrant sensibility, sense of belongingness and nostalgia. The novels taken for the study are *The Tiger's Daughter*(1971), *Wife*(1975), *Jasmine*(1989).

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 Sarfan 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..."

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.

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. 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.

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.

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 canvass. Her novels honestly depicts 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.

Mukherjee’s novels 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. 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.

Works Cited:

- Bharati Mukherjee. *The Tiger’s Daughters*. New Delhi: Penguin Books (India) Ltd., 1971. Print
- _____. *Wife*. New Delhi: Penguin Books (India) Ltd., 1976. Print
- _____. *Jasmine*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin Books (India) Ltd., 1990. Print
- Chen, Tina and S.X.Goudie. “Holder of the World: An Interview with Bharati Mukherjee.” *Jouvert* 1.1, 1997: 104 pars. Online. Internet. 25 Dec 2009.
- William, Safran. *Satendra Nandan Diasporic Consciousness Interrogative post-colonial: column Theory, Text and Context*. Eds. Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee. Indian Institute of Advanced Studies. 1996: 63. Print