

IDENTITY CRISES AND CULTURAL CONFLICT IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract

In post-colonial societies, the crisis of identity often seems to override all considerations. Bharati Mukherjee deals with the themes related to Indian women particularly the problem of cross-cultural crisis and ultimate search for Identity. She also depicts the cultural clash between the east and the west. She writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavours to assume a new identity in the U.S. When a person leaves his own culture and enters into another culture, his original culture comes into conflict with the new one he finds in the alien land. This cultural transplant leads to a crisis of identity. This paper will shed light on the identity crisis and cultural conflict of the east and women in opposition to the dominant power of the west and men with references to Mukherjee's novels within the framework of multicultural and feminist perspectives.

Key Words: Cultural Conflict, Identity Crisis, Feminism, East, West, Cultural clash, immigrants, acculturation, alienation, Assimilation, womanhood, Values,

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee is in the same lineage of writers who show the pleasures and pains of being in identity crisis through their novels. She occupies an important place among the Indian women novelists writing in English and belongs to the body of writers who by choice or otherwise have left their countries of origin and made their homes elsewhere. Her novels like *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife* and *Jasmine* explore the shifting identities of diasporic women in present day both in United States, India and in the past. The novels of Mukherjee are self-actualizing. Quest

for self and search for identity are main features of her women who are seen caught in the flux of tradition and modernity.

The concept of identity involves the idea of separation or distancing from literal homeland or a cultural origin. The concept of identity has often been ambiguous but has been applied in many disciplines across the world. However this concept has mainly been used in political science to explain national, ethnic, racial or gender issues. Identity is concerned with the self-image of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or a nation, real or imaginary dealing with exercise and role who are we? What position we have in society? (Bammer 81). The identity of an individual is shaped by his self- perceptions of the world surrounding him based on the religion, race, class, economic and social status of family, cultural and religious beliefs shared by the society in which the individual lives. This identity may be either a group identity or an individual identity. So far as gender identities are concerned, these are the quest for equality and dignity for their progress and development. The issue of identity crises has become the motive of most post-colonial literatures.

The problem of identity has been one of the major problem of mankind in every society. It does not really matter which ethnic group, culture or religion someone belongs to as far as identity crisis is concerned. The conflicts, negotiations, search of identity could have to do with various issues such as West vs. East, new vs. old or modern vs. conservative. When a person migrates from his society and bearing to another society. Once in a foreign land, the migrated people find in their culture a defence mechanism against a sense of insecurity in alien settings and they try to stick to their identity of home and nation. This leads to the identity crises of the diasporic communities.

Problems of identity figure more prominently in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. In her novels quest for identity is not tagged to self alone, it goes beyond the self to issues of culture. Mukherjee's protagonists faced with a loss of identity at each stage. Her Indian immigrants in the foreign countries carry dual or multiple identities instead of one identity. The female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee's novels are characterized by identity crisis even their attempts to find root are either half-hearted or unrealistic. Bharati Mukherjee has admitted that an issue very important to her is—"The finding of a new identity....the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born in to and then replanting yourself in another culture"(Nayak 123).

Bharati Mukherjee, a world acclaimed novelist of post-modern era has taken up the theme of identity crisis as one of the major themes in all her novels, depicting the psychological, cultural and spiritual stress faced by expatriates migrating to other countries in search of fortune. Twentieth century being described by many as the age of anxiety and age of alienation, novelists have shifted their attention from external to internal and social to individual mental explorations of their protagonists. With modernization, the traditional family system is breaking apart leading to an unmistakable identity crisis in the younger generation. Besides the constant movement to different lands in search of better prospects is further uprooting the modern milieu. It is difficult to re-root in an alien land and snapping one's own root is a painful process involving mental, spiritual and emotional trauma leading to cultural and self-alienation.

Mukherjee is a writer who explores through her fiction the meaning of life. Issues related to women are central to her novels. She deals with the problems of Indian immigrants mainly women. She writes about the struggles and problems faced by Indian women. She takes up the problem of adjustment that the Indians in the West have to face. Her novels also reflect the

temperament of the present American society as experienced by the Indian immigrants in America. In a recent interview she has clearly stated her aim in her novels-

“We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are placed by civil and religious conflicts..... When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here either by choice or out of necessity. We suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society..... I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country” (Roy 85).

Born in India and married to Canadian writer Clark Blaise Mukherjee lived in Canada for fourteen years as an expatriate and later came to United States to settle down as an immigrant. Her various life's experience is a saga of alienation and assimilation. She has woven her own life experiences and her immense literary knowledge blending with her imagination to create beautiful, interesting and mind-capturing stories. All her novels depict the theme of alienation and displacement of the protagonists at the beginning and finally ending with reconciliation leading to assimilation.

The main aim of this paper is to show how immigrants in Mukherjee's novels such as *The Tiger's Daughters*, *Wife* and *Jasmine* try to adapt to American society. In her novels Mukherjee attempts to express the newfound identity of immigrant women who struggle to survive in an alien land. Mukherjee asserted that in an age of diasporas one's biological identity may not be one's real identity as emigration brings changes, physical and psychological both. Mukherjee believes in the present not in the past because it will help to shape her future. She realized that her transformation was a two-way process because it affected both the individual as well as the cultural identity. While other writers of migration write about a new place with a sense of loss and erosion of original culture.

Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a very fine manifestation of quest for identity and cultural conflict. It was conceived in a very difficult phase of life when the heroine of the novel was struggling to determine her own identity in the Indian culture. The story of the novel runs parallel to 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 impecuniosities 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.

In this novel Mukherjee tries to show how the immigrants try to adapt to American society and how in consequence are portrayed as rootless. This is an interesting story of an upper class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies. In America she senses discrimination. Tara's efforts to adapt to American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion of Indian modes of life. Circumstances so contrive incidentally that she falls in love with an American whom she marries later. Tara's husband David Cartwright is wholly western and she is always apprehensive of this fact. She cannot communicate with him because of the finer nuances of her family background. Her failure to do so is rooted in their cultural differences.

After a gap of seven years Tara plans a trip to India. Four 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 protagonist of the novel *Tara Cartwright* is an autobiographical presentation of the author herself. On her visit to India Tara feels bewildered. There is a strange fusion of American-ness and Indian-ness in the psyche of Tara. She returns to India after seven years only to find herself a total stranger amidst the Indians. The new Americanized Tara fails to bring back her old sense of perception and views India with the keenness of a foreigner. Tara's journey to India proves frustrating, slowly leading to disillusion, depression and finally her tragic end. She realizes that she has drowned her childhood memories in the crowd of America. Tara is totally confused. She cannot share her feelings with her friends and relatives and she fails to share things with her foreign husband. For David she is a foreigner and for her Indian friends and relatives she is a sinner who has polluted herself by marrying an outcaste person. There is a communication gap between Tara and her relatives due to cultural disparities. Now she becomes unable to fit in the culture of Calcutta where she grew up. She realises that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. Most of the times she remains lost in the memories of America. While in America Tara was always conscious of her foreignness. She felt herself rootless but things do not appear better in India also. With coming back to India, America looks like a dream land to her. Just a few days have passed since she left America but it seems to her that she had never been out of India. Her old sense of pride comes back to her. She had not thought that seven years in another country, a husband and a new blue passport could be so easily blotted out.

The same note of identity crisis and cultural conflict can also be seen in Mukherjee's novel *Wife* which focuses on how cultural displacement or dislocation cause new identities but through a rigorous path. In *Wife*, Mukherjee expresses and challenges the hardships of multicultural society of an immigrant. Dimple Dasgupta, the heroine of the novel migrates to America because of her marriage with Amit. She imagines that moving to U.S. will bring about a sea-change in her life. Though married to an educated husband Dimple is not able to strike a balance between the two juxtaposed worlds, the one she left behind and the other she has come to live in. She was always been conscious of her foreignness. On more than one occasion she realizes that she is an outsider in America. She becomes unable to fit in the culture of America and it fills her with a sense of identity crisis.

Thus Dimple appears as victim of conflicting cultures. She fails to be at peace with herself as well as with her surroundings. She cannot come to terms with either her own culture or America's culture; she finds herself at cross-roads and visualizes her life as dying bonfire. Mukherjee says about her- "She remains neither an American nor an Indian. She keeps hanging in the air like the mythical "Trishanku" and typifies the real condition of a person who is caught in the net of two cultures (Banerjee 67).

Both Tara as well as Dimple suffers from cultural alienation by rejecting and repelling from reality. Eventually escaping in to illusion they drift farther and farther away from reality leading to nowhere but Mukherjee's third novel *Jasmine* represents assimilation of alien culture more. Jasmine the title character is under transformation to adapt to the new land in which she enters by her fate.

The problem of identity crisis and cultural clash is also dealt in the novel *Jasmine*. Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* reveals a more positivistic approach to the problem of immigration. 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. In this novel Mukherjee writes how the female protagonist tries to tackle the problem of loss of culture and endeavours to assume a new identity in the U.S.

The Indian author Bharati Mukherjee's 1989 novel *Jasmine* is the story of a young Indian woman from Punjab, India who experiences identity crisis and cultural conflict both in and out of her own culture. In other words the story narrates Jasmine's search for her true and unfragmented identity and the transformations she experiences in a positive and optimistic way. Thus, it becomes a tale of moral courage seeking for self-awareness. Contrary to the traditional woman's image, it presents a diametrically opposite picture of the woman who can be termed as the new woman. This woman has come to signify the awakening of woman in to a new realization of her place and position in family and society.

The heroine of the novel *Jasmine* arrives in America with the hope of fulfilling the unfinished dreams of her husband but she suffers from a sense of exile. On reaching the U.S. she begins to search for self-independence. She struggles hard to achieve it and at last she realizes that self-independence is not to be an Indian or American but to be at peace with herself. On more than one occasion she realizes that she is an outsider in America. She passes through different stages, in childhood she transits from Jyoti to Jasmine, from Jasmine to Jase and from Jase to Jane. Her journey begins from a small village of Punjab, Hasnapur from where she moves to Jalandhar and then to U.S. In this gradual process of migration she has to pass through different environmental and societal changes. These changes have tremendous effect on her life. She does not remain same at every stage of her life. As the change permits she has to adjust according to that. In this novel the change in woman's life from Jyoti to Jasmine and Jasmine to Jase is due to the migration and the change of the society. She has not preferred the change voluntarily. At every stage of her life she suffers because of her Indian cultural consciousness. Thus Mukherjee depicts Jasmine's character as bold, independent and ready to act kind which is not thought in an orthodox or conservative society which is the reason for her alienation. Thus for Jasmine like Bharati Mukherjee herself the exile from her old culture and immigration to new land becomes an exciting and exhilarating process.

To sum up all the characters in Mukherjee's novels face identity crisis. It is self-alienation of her characters that is brought to focus in the novel. The characters we find are forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands. Mukherjee places her characters in certain delicate human situations and they embark on self-analysis. They make self-discovery and very often find themselves alienated. Many times they travel through a world of fantasy in order to come to terms with the reality of situations. The immigrant experience is complicated as a sensitive immigrant finds himself perpetually at a transit station fraught with memories of the original home which are struggling with the realities of the new world. Mukherjee masterfully explores the themes of the complexities of immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of life styles cultural disorientations, conflicts of assimilation. Bharati Mukherjee is the most controversial narrator of Indian cultural identity in a multicultural context. Thus the search for a new identity in America for immigrants and particular to women is an odyssey which requires sacrifices on the part of those who aspire for it.

Every culture has its own strengths and weaknesses. The immigrants often try to find sync between the native culture and the adopted one. But this has resulted in psychological eccentricities that are alien to both the cultures. Hence the solution to this problem is retaining one's culture as far as possible even while living on an alien soil.

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