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Understanding the Experiences of Women Immigrants in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract

Migration is a continuous process since the dawn of human history. Diasporic literature deals with the issues of immigrant's adaptation in the host country. Immigration is not a smooth process and immigrants are always at the crossroads in the host country. In her novels Bharati Mukherjee deals with the problematic situation of the immigrants who are deeply rooted in home country. Modest attempt has been made to analyse the novels of Bharati Mukherjee to understand the trajectory of immigration of her women characters. The protagonists in her novels are women immigrants who tries to overcome the "foreignness of spirit" in the host country.

Keywords: immigrants, foreignness of spirit, Bharati Mukherjee.

Introduction:

Whether desired or not 'human migration' influences the modern world like never before. Millions of people move outside their countries of birth in search of jobs, a new home or simply a secure place to live. Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are subjected to displacement both geographically as well as culturally. Literature of diaspora deals with the narratives of individuals who experience the pain of immigration and dislocation. This migration culminates from choice and the intensity of choice rests on the social status of the immigrant. Notwithstanding to the degree of their choice, whether self-imposed or forceful, the immigrants are always at the crossroads in the host country. To simply put, immigration is hardly a smooth process in which a person, in order to find a more prospective life, decides to pull up his or her roots in the place of origin and quickly becomes assimilated in the new country. Much more often migration is a tedious process affecting the migrant in many ways (Castles and Miller). More significantly, migration experience varies in accordance with men and women. Bharati Mukherjee is the critically acclaimed Indian-born American novelist and short story writer whose writing reflects Indian culture and immigrant experience. She might be considered "the quintessential immigrant turned citizen who now embraces being an "American citizen" with a troubling and insistent fierceness" (Mandal). In her novels, Bharati Mukherjee deals with the problems of migrancy and its ensuing ramification on migrant people pertaining to their identity crisis and feeling of estrangement in the adopted country. The pain of immigration and dislocation and the perennial longing for one's homeland is reflected in her works. Her writings expose the problematic situation of the immigrants who are deeply rooted in their country of origin. On the flip side, Mukherjee sheds light on the integration of the immigrant in the foreign culture. The present paper attempts to analyse the novels of Bharati Mukherjee to understand the trajectory of immigration of her women characters. The study aims to explain the forces underlying the individual decision to move from one social setting to another one. The protagonists in her novels are women immigrants enduring extensive trials and tribulations, isolation, alienation, and frustration as they try to create their own space in the newfound world. In most cases, they must get into multiple identities. Mukherjee



herself faced difficulties with her identities first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the United States. Almost all the female protagonists in Mukherjee's novels engaged in the "nuanced process of *rehousement* after the trauma of forced or voluntary *unhousement* (Mukherjee).

In her works Mukherjee succeeds in capturing the feeling of being here and there. From her first novel, *The Tiger's Daughters*, to her last book, *Miss New India*, she confronts and describes the world as an open-ended space which is ever-changing. Her first novel *The Tiger's Daughters* focuses on the discovery of the heroine, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, that her homeland and people is not same when she left it years before. To her dismay it is now in a state of terminal decline, making her to see her own "foreignness of spirit," which ultimately leads her to realise that her future lay not in it but in expatriation. In short, *The Tiger's Daughter*, is crafted to encapsulate the anguish of someone coming back years after to her homeland: to such a person, home will never be same again, and although it is unpleasant, life in exile will be selected eventually over the homeland. The novelist does not provide any clarity about Tara's future course of action as the novel ends with Tara stuck fast in a car that is flanked by rioters, wondering "whether she would get out of Calcutta, and if she didn't, whether David would ever know that she loved him fiercely" (*The Tiger's Daughter* 210).

Much like *The Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife*, was also written in the beginning of her stay in Canada. Published in 1975, the novel gives an instance of the matter and manner of her work. She wrote this work as a response to one innocent question asked by a Columbia professor who wanted to know the everyday life of Bengali girls between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. Dimple Dasgupta, the heroine of the novel, is a young Bengali woman who has an arranged marriage to Amit Basu, an engineer, instead of marrying a neurosurgeon as she had dreamed about. Soon after the marriage the Basus move to the United State. Dimple, feeling alienated in America, experiences cultural shock and loneliness. Although she is helped by her husband and his friends to assimilate in America, Dimple is unable to effect change in herself. Her frustration grows into insanity culminating with the murder of her husband, Amit at the end. *Wife* serves as a foil to *The Tiger's Daughter*. While the latter is exclusively set in India, most of the action in *Wife* happens in the United States. Dimple's overindulgence in the fantasy world and her inability to get away from the Bengali culture in which she is confined to, despite her moving to New York City, differ from Tara's wakeful realization that she is unfit for her homeland. Mukherjee continues to elaborate the theme of immigration and how it acts as reincarnation for her characters in the next novel *Jasmine*. Here, Mukherjee portrays various features of the immigrant experiences in America, in the act, unfolding the traumatic experiences and cultural perplexities of the South-Asian immigrant. The novel, *Jasmine*, is the landmark in Bharati Mukherjee's the scholarly career as a writer because it has metamorphosed her from a recorder of exile to a crusader of immigrants. In this novel she deviates from the linear narrative technique used in the previous work and employs what Gurleen Grewal rightly pointed out in her essay "Born Again American: The Immigrant Consciousness in *Jasmine*" as "nonlinear narrative technique of montage and jump-cuts, shuffling us back and forth in time" (Grewal). Also, in the presentation of Jasmine's character, Mukherjee enhances images of the Third World Woman who is restrained by her womanliness and by the Indian patriarchy. Jasmine is shown by the author as someone who resists this subjugation of woman based on gender and class. As a writer, Mukherjee successfully explores the promises of emancipation through transformation on the grounds of immigration to the New World for oppressed, rural, and lower-middle-class women from the Third World. In *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee exhibits the true assimilation of an immigrant in the American culture. The novel put in a nutshell the spirit of twenty-first-century mass migration and dislocation. In *Jasmine*, the protagonist constantly shuttles between her identities ascribed to her dislocation. In the course of the novel, we witness the heroine Jyoti, born in a small village of Hasnapur, transforms into Jasmine, (named again by her city based husband), a spilt-tongued Kali (murdering Half-Faced who raped her), Jazzy (illegal immigrant in Florida), Jyoti again (staying in an enclave of Indians in Flushing), Jase (working as the "day mummy" to the adopted daughter of liberal Manhattan couple), and finally Jane (as the mistress of Bud, an Iowan banker).

After the tremendous success of *Jasmine*, Mukherjee published her fourth novel, *The Holder of the World*, in 1993. The novel is considered as a masterpiece of storytelling where Mukherjee weaves both the future and the past into a story that is not only intelligent but also appealing. To meet her purpose, Mukherjee infuses subplot to the main plot in the novel. The main plot of the novel digs into the story of Hannah Easton, an exceptional woman who is born in the American colonies in 1670 and turns into an emperor's mistress in India. Curious, energetic, and conscious of her prospects, Hannah make an expedition to Mughal India along with her husband, and English trader. The novel is Hannah's story, narrated by Beigh dwelling on the subjects that excites her: the passage of time, the distinction of efforts to recreate a segment of time that has passed, the clash of values as a result of New World meeting the Old, the exercising of power by free-spirited women in a conservative society and how that society exacts its revenge.



In 1997, Mukherjee published her fifth novel, *Leave It to Me* where she explores issues of identity, ethnicity, and history from a fresh angle. Infusing the Indian concept of Karma and the Greek notions of destiny, the novel tells the story of Debby who is dumped in an orphanage by her American hippie mother and Eurasian Indian father. She is later taken in by an Italian American family, DiMartino. In *Leave It to Me*, Bharati Mukherjee employs her favourite themes: exiles, assimilation, and metamorphosis of the female protagonist as she casts off her past life while entering in a country where freedom led to rootlessness, association into dislocation.

In *Desirable Daughters*, migrant experience enables the protagonist to cut loose from her Indianness and enjoys complete social, financial, and sexual freedom. Once again, marriage acts as a driving force for the protagonist's moving out from her place of origin. Tara, the heroine of the novel, leaves India immediately after her marriage with Bishwapriya Chatterjee who goes on to become Bill Gates of South Asian community in Silicon Valley. The novel begins with the wedding scene of Tara Lata, the tree bride. At the age of five, Tara the daughter of Jay Krishna Gangooly has to marry a sundari tree to avoid the ignominy of widowhood. Tara's gradual Americanization allows her to pursue happiness and exercise her free will. She not only divorces her husband but also gets into a live-in relationship. Tara embarks on roots retrieval when an imposter poses as her sister's illegitimate son. To unravel the truth about her lineage, Tara returns to India to visit her ancestral village Mishtigunj. In the process she also comes to know the story of her great grandmother, the Tree Bride.

Mukherjee moves forward the story of *Desirable Daughters* in her next novel, *The Tree Bride*. Tara's exploration of her heritage and identity leads her to the story of her name sake, Tara Lata Gangooly, the Tree Bride. For Tara, getting back to her roots is an atonement for her discarding cultural conditioning. In this novel Bharati Mukherjee deals with the issues of colonialism and assimilation of white men into Indian culture. Both *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* are infused with autobiographical elements of the writer. Mukherjee, like Tara, exhibits strong cultural bonding with her homeland and culture. The novel depicts the cultural dislocation of Indian people attributed to the Macaulayism in India, and the systematic wiping out of traditional and ancient Indian education system (Kampfner). "Homing desire" of a diaspora is another theme of the novel as Tara set herself on "America-styled root-search".

In her last novel, *Miss New India*, Bharati Mukherjee focuses on the theme of internal migration and transnational migration. Again, like other novels of the novelist, matrimony acts as the motivating force for Anjali's dislocation. In order to escape from the oppressiveness of arranged marriage Anjali leaves Gauripur. As a consequence of disastrous encounter with her prospective bridegroom, Anjali sets off to Bangalore for shaping her future. The novelist depicts the influence of Western ideals on the young generation in India. Mukherjee also builds up some of the problems raised in her earlier novels, such as the process of "unhousement" and "rehousement," the reinvention of identities, and the awakening of the female migrant characters to self-empowerment. Anjali, the heroine of *Miss New India*, leaves a city where she was brought up and starts a new life in Bangalore which is way different from her native place. Although set in India, American culture and values plays a decisive role in this novel.

To conclude, Mukherjee looks at the issue of immigration as an insider and explores the trajectory of Indian women immigrants whose horizon is forever expanding as they move out of their homeland. Mukherjee's novels imbued with the push-pull theories of migration. The causes of migration in her novels consist in a composition of 'push factors', obliging female protagonists to move out of the place of origin, and 'pull factors', alluring them to a land of plenty. Her characters choose to uproot themselves from their native country.

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CERTIFICATE OF PUBLICATION

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