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Emotional Roller-coaster in the Diasporic Third Space for Women: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Works

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Abstract

Aim: *This paper seeks to explore the diasporic experiences and identity struggles of women characters in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. It highlights how these women attempt to negotiate belonging, memory, and identity in unfamiliar social and cultural settings.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on close textual reading of Mukherjee's selected novels. In addition to primary texts, relevant secondary sources on diaspora and postcolonial studies have been consulted to support the analysis. The research also draws on the concept of the "Third Space" articulated by Homi K. Bhabha to understand how hybrid identities emerge when individuals live between cultures.*

Outcome: *The analysis shows that Mukherjee's female protagonists undergo significant emotional and psychological transformations as they attempt to adapt to life in a new country. Characters such as Tara, Dimple, and Jasmine experience loneliness, cultural confusion, and a sense of being caught between two identities. At the same time, their journeys demonstrate resilience and personal growth as they gradually negotiate new ways of understanding themselves and their surroundings.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The paper concludes that Bharati Mukherjee's fiction offers a nuanced portrayal of the immigrant experience, particularly from a woman's perspective. Her narratives illustrate how migration reshapes identity and creates hybrid cultural spaces where individuals must constantly redefine themselves. By foregrounding the voices of diasporic women, Mukherjee's works contribute significantly to discussions on migration, gender, and cultural identity in contemporary literature.*

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Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian American diasporic fiction writer, explores migration, the status of new immigrants, their loneliness and identity crises. Her writings offer distinct insights and profundity into the immigration and integration of South Asians in the diasporic setup. Due to her experience as a migrant, Mukherjee has firsthand experience of the psychological and social challenges. She describes her characters as undergoing "extreme transformation in America, and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up" (654). Her works cover a broad spectrum of diaspora issues, including, but not limited to, displacement, fragmentation, homesickness, marginalisation, racial, cultural, and gender hatred, racial conflicts, generational gaps, shifts in subjectivity, emerging patterns of life from cross-cultural interactions, and the disintegration of family units. Bharati Mukherjee's characters are uncertain about their place in society and searching for their heritage, roots, and identity as they face the challenges in the migrated land where the norms and challenges of adapting are challenging.

Diaspora initially referred to the dispersion and movement of Jews during the Holocaust. However, the term has now come to encompass the global experiences and perspectives of immigrants and expatriates. A better definition of diaspora would be the forced or voluntary relocation of a people from their homeland to another nation, often in search of better standards of living, professional success or academic excellence. When someone relocates to a new nation (especially from a non-Western to Western nations), they face the challenge of assimilating/adapting into a new culture and yet at the same time aspire to hold on to their traditions. Thus, cultures for diasporic individuals blend to form a mosaic where the diasporic individuals are eager to take up the culture of the adopted land and at the same time try their best to retain their own traditions, customs and stereotypes. According to Pramod Nayar, diasporic writing is about "a negotiation with a retreating history, past, traditions and customs" and looking forward to "a future, seeking new vistas, new chances" (188). Salman Rushdie exemplifies the diasporic dichotomy of these individuals more cohesively as he states, "What is the best thing about migrant people...? I think it is their hopefulness... And what's the worst thing? It's the emptiness of one's baggage.

We've come unstuck from more than land. We've floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time" (91).

Bharati Mukherjee's novels such as *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Desirable Daughters*, and others, adeptly depict the feelings of displacement, isolation, cultural disconnection, and a search for identity among immigrants caught between their Indian culture and adopted country. When Mukherjee relocated to the United States, it sparked a renewed interest in literature and caused a dramatic transformation in her personality, as she states, "For me it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration" (Darkness, 3).

Mukherjee's narratives often feature female protagonists who are Indian immigrants who suffer cultural clashes and struggle with their identities and who, following displacement, seek to rediscover themselves through psychological adjustments and maladjustments. Mukherjee writes about these immigrant women who fight in unfamiliar places, both physically and psychologically. This mental state of immigrants is powerfully articulated in Salman Rushdie's essay "*Imaginary Homelands*":

I am speaking now of those of us who emigrated...and I suspect that there are times when the move seems wrong to us all, when we seem, to ourselves, postlapsarian men and women. We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result- as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates- we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and Partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools (Rushdie 15).

An immigrant's quest for identity amid cultural conflict is beautifully depicted in Mukherjee's debut novel *The Tiger's Daughter*. The novel's plot is inspired by real events that occurred in 1973, when Mukherjee and her Canadian husband, Clark Blaise, returned to India. After a seven-year absence, the heroine Tara Cartwright Banerjee revisits her hometown in search of herself and her position in the world. Tara pursues further education in the United States. Discrimination and humiliation hit her hard in Poughkeepsie. Her heart goes out to David Cartwright. David does

not care about her heritage or culture as he is entirely Western. As she comes to India, she views India through the eyes of a tourist after arriving at Bombay Airport. Her loved ones greet her warmly, but she remains cold. "On her way to Vassar seven years ago, she had admired the house on Marine Drive and thought they were fashionable, but now their shabbiness horrified her." (22). The railway station provokes an equally contemptuous response from Tara. Many sick and deformed individuals sat listlessly on bundles and trunks; she "thought the station was more like a hospital" (24). She feels quite disgruntled as Howrah station is crowded with family. She realises that she feels more at ease in the United States and yet could not think of the US as home, even though her spouse is white. Worshipping alongside her mother causes her to lose track of the proper rites. "It was not a simple loss... this forgetting of prescribed actions; it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and centre" (64), she realises. Thus, the two cultures clash in Tara's psyche as she struggles to integrate with white America (despite her spouse being white) and yet somehow losing touch with her Indian roots. Naxalite rioting during final chapters of the novel makes her shudder and thereafter she could not take it anymore and decides to return to America. Tara is represented to be feeling even isolated and disgruntled even in her supposed own country, though she had hoped earlier that "all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta" (25), while she was in America. Thus, Tara's psychological and physical entrapping in both the cultures makes her figure out that she is neither here nor there – she now belongs to the "third space" to use a phrase by Bhabha, where she is "double, but not yet one" – she is Indian- American but neither completely Indian nor truly American. This dichotomy that Tara suffers from is the fate of the immigrants which Mukherjee is able to adeptly put forward in her debut work.

Similarly, *Wife* explores themes of cultural clash and identity crisis, though can lead to forging of new identities, though not without hardship. In *Wife*, Mukherjee confronts and discusses the challenges of being an immigrant in a multicultural society – "I was no longer accustomed to the omniscience that was characteristic of the American manner. I felt more authentic, and the content was more intense. For the sake of my love, I had forsaken irony" (Steinberg 33). After

her marriage to Amit, Dimple Dasgupta migrates to America. She thought that her life would be drastically different if she moved to the US as she had imagined her life about the west where "real happiness was just in the movies or in the West" (47). Despite being married to an educated man, Dimple struggles to find a middle ground between her former and new lives. She feels like alien in America as she tries to adapt and adopt the American ways but feels that she cannot connect with the American culture. Dimple feels herself to be a victim of civilisations standards which are at odds with each other:

She had expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness (115).

Reconciliation between the two culture becomes a daunting challenge for her as "She remains neither an American nor an Indian," Mukherjee says, eloquently describing Dimple's plight as an immigrant. Like the legendary "Trishanku," she floats in midair, representing the universal experience of being torn between two civilizations (Banerjee 67).

Thus, both Tara and Dimple are represented to be living with challenges of adapting of the new culture and therefore finding themselves to be in a state of flux with which they are not able to adjust themselves. As against these two narratives and their protagonists, a better cultural integration is seen in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee's third novel, which too poignantly portrays the challenges and triumphs involved in adapting to the new culture, encompassing survival, compromise, loss, and acculturation. In her fictionalization of Americanization, Mukherjee follows a young Indian woman as she overcomes trauma and seeks to forge a new identity, challenging traditional notions of fate and resigned acceptance. Jasmine is a character in her own right, as she is free-spirited and eager to carve their paths. Through Jasmine's journey from Punjab to California, via Florida, New York, and Iowa, Mukherjee demonstrates cross-cultural transformation. From the Punjabi village of Hasnapur, our heroine Jyoti is at the center of this tale. She gradually assimilates into American culture, as evidenced by her multiple name changes

throughout her transformations. With Prakash, Jyoti of Hasnapur becomes Jasmine; with Taylor, Jase; with Bud, Jane; and with Half-Face, Kali. An identity crisis and cultural conflict, both within and outside her own culture, beset Jasmine. The story truthfully recounts Jasmine's journey of self-discovery and the changes she undergoes during this time - a new woman trying to figure out her roles in the home and society.

As she reaches the US, she begins her search for freedom and works very hard to be independent and realises that is about being content with oneself. Orthodox or conservative society would likely disapprove of Jasmine's portrayal, as she is strong-willed and self-reliant, woman trying to carve an identity for herself and the diasporic "third space" provides her the chance to carry out this journey. She is prepared to adapt to fit in with American society, and by the end of the narrative, she embraces American culture to some extent successfully as he is able to find a new role for herself and it content with what she has achieved.

Desirable Daughters further explores this process of seeking an identity in the context of cultural hybridity as in a diasporic context one cannot authentically call oneself to be belonging to any one culture. "The challenge for people today is to navigate and combine an unprecedented range of cultural territories, and recurrences, ranging from relatively unfamiliar terrains imported to the self through technological mediation and human migrations of various types, to territory that is more familiar and stable, such as that offered by religion, notions, and family, to invent combinations that satisfy individuals' changing needs," writes James Lull as he discusses the necessity of hybrid cultures. (Lead 138). *Desirable Daughters* explores this cultural hybridity as three sisters, Padma, Parvati, and Tara seek a newer means to find their own selves in the narrative. Motilal Bhattacharjee, an engineer, has established a tea business, who is the father of the three daughters: Padma, Parvati, and Tara. Located on Ballygunge Park Road, the Bhattacharjees' mansion is a Raj-style stronghold. The Bhattacharjees belong to the *bhadralok* society and prides themselves for a legacy of leadership, sensitivity, accomplishment, refinement, and beauty. The three sisters were born into the realm of Calcutta high society, but gone their separate ways. Padma, the eldest daughter, and her husband, Harish Mehta, reside in New Jersey. Harish is a divorcee and has two children of

his own. The middle daughter, Parvati, lives in Bombay with her husband, Aurobindo, and their two children, Dinesh and Bhupesh. Andy, a Buddhist from Hungary, and her son Rabi reside in California with Tara, the youngest daughter.

Mukherjee explores the hybridity of cultures through these three female protagonists in *Desirable Daughters*, who, in the third space, try to explore their own culture and heritage. Tara is a unique blend of Indian and American cultures. Tara values her heritage, family, and culture above all else, and she is open to both traditional and progressive perspectives on America. Despite their exposure to American culture, Padma and Parvati remain firmly rooted in their Bengali heritage. They are not prepared to alter. To fit in with society, the three sisters follow different routes. In New York, Padma leads a Bengali lifestyle. Not even she mingles with anyone other than Indians. Among her fellow Bengalis, she becomes a symbol of Bengali culture. Serving the cultural needs of Indians is her livelihood. She is a full-time expat. She is fiercely loyal to her heritage, identity, and way of life. Tara, on the other hand, remains true to herself while embracing American culture. When Padma refuses to relinquish her Indian culture in America, Tara finds it irritating. When compared to Padma, Tara navigates the boundary between Indian tradition and American openness with care. In India, San Francisco, and Atherton, Tara feels most comfortable. She questions conventional notions of nationality, culture, and identity. Cultural hybridity in diaspora is beautifully depicted in Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, as Homi Bhabha states in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford.

The notion of hybridity originates from two prior descriptions: the genealogy of difference and the concept of translation, specifically the act of cultural translation. (both as representation and as reproduction) denies the essentialism of a prior given original or originary culture...all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace to original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it and establishes new structures of authority and new political initiatives. Hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance forms itself, it may demand that you translate your

principles, rethink them, and extend them (Rutherford 211-16).

Mukherjee's narratives on immigration, cross-cultural experiences, and assimilation have gained notable recognition as diasporic literature, which are characterised by a unique cross-cultural sensibility rooted in her own experiences as an expatriate and immigrant in the US. With precision, Mukherjee channels her creative energies into her diasporic imagination, which extends beyond mere rhetoric to form the core of her storytelling. Her works require a transformation of identity. Bharati Mukherjee's characters, including Jasmine, Tara Cartwright, Dimple, and Tara Chatterjee, all undergo reincarnation with new identities, forging futures that enable them to express themselves openly, whether through sensuality or by revealing their suppressed selves. The women in Mukherjee's stories cannot turn back the clock on reincarnation once it has begun, even after experiencing multiple displacements and relocations. In conclusion, Bharati Mukherjee's fiction explores various facets of diasporic consciousness and the immigrant experience, including displacement, rupture, and the relocation of women.

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