

“Cross-Cultural Challenges and Women Identity” in Bharati Mukherjee’s Novels

Abstract

This paper is based on the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. The aim of this paper is to focus the problem of cultural identity and women identity. Bharati Mukherjee clearly portrait the picture of immigrants experiences. They are shifted from their mother land to foreign countries. The feeling of alienation and detachment from their native land are the main problems of immigrants. Here she also depicts the conflict between the two cultures. The protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novels they are facing lots of problems for established herself in a foreign land. But these characters have not forgotten their culture, values, norms, custom, because they grown up with their culture. That is the reason they are bound to their Indian culture and values.

Keywords: Alienation, Immigrants, Indian Culture, Suffering, Woman Identity.

Introduction

This paper deals with various aspect of self as an individual identity in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. The study deals out with different kinds of the characters in the novels. In Indian culture have different types of norms and custom which serve the purpose of patriarchy set up of the society. As a diasporic writer, Bharati Mukherjee tries to demonstrate all the issues associated with immigrants experience in the United State. Bharati Mukherjee’s takes different types of characters and they all are from different parts of the world having ethnic, values, religious and traditions, Mukherjee’s work based on social problems and the issues which are relate with women suffering. Actually her stories are based on her personal experience. “Mukherjee has established herself as a powerful member of the American Literary scene. Her most of the memorable works reflects not only her pride in Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America as said in an Interview in The Massachusetts Review, “the immigrants in my stories go through extreme transform America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological makeup”¹. She considers her work a celebration of her emotions that she brings out of her heart. Bharati Mukherjee as a diasporic writer trying to focusing on the problem of immigrants experience, identity crises, rootlessness, nostalgia, alienation and homesickness. The protagonists are fighting between the two cultures. They are trying to adopt a new culture but it’s very difficult to forget their culture and except the new one.

Aim of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the problem of immigrants. Those who left their native land and settle down in foreign country. And what type of problems they are facing there, how they survive, how they established themselves and this is the big challenge for them. This paper mainly focuses on the problem of women identity and the cross cultural identity in Bharati Mukherjee’s novels. The protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee they all are suffering from same issues.

Main Content of Paper

Indian women are more conscious about the ethics, moral values and norms of society. Indian culture is the most orthodox on the ground of ethos and feminine world. Many Indian Writers reveal this serious issue to help the society to become a developed one in respect of women. The society should not be biased in designate roles to women. “We live in a world of assumptions and ideas. One significant determining influence in our lives is our understanding of human nature, from which flows our beliefs or ‘religions’ about gender.”² Identity is a state of mind that is granted by the interaction with the beings in the society and also, by the acceptance in the society. Women’s effort to seek their independence and self-identity started a revolution all over the world. A woman’s identity crisis



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is that where she struggles to achieve as a human being in its full sense against those forces of society who tie her in chains. Earlier, woman sought her identity in the relationship as a wife, mother and daughter. She accepted all these identities. "Women and Identity addressed how women can challenge, neutralize, and modify the widely held social imperatives that restrict their mobility and fulfillment in society. A primary focus is how women can live more meaningfully through heightened identity awareness and more expansive commitments. Action flows from beliefs, and to the extent that women empower their convictions or "religions" about themselves, others ultimately become responsive and supportive of their new autonomy. Ways through which women can escape their confining roles are emphasized rather than the sources and nature of limited identity and entrapment."³ 'Quest for identity' the discussion highlights the importance of communal belonging. It suggests that the quest for identity may lead individuals to follow many directions. The quest for identity is a basic human need, the need to structure one's personal identity. The person and rootedness characteristic of the communitarian conception of the person, both play an important role in the formation of personal identity. "Pleasure is western society's permanent special offer for women. But some drive is required to take up that offer. And it is female desire which makes us respond and take up that offer. To be a woman is to be constantly addressed, to be constantly scrutinized, and to have our desire constantly courted—in the kitchen, on the streets, in the world of fashion, in films and in fiction. Issuing forth from books and magazines, from films and television, from the radio, there are endless questions about what women desire, endless theories and opinions offered. Desire is stimulated and endlessly defined. Everywhere it seems female desire is sought, bought, packaged and consumed."⁴ But now-a-days woman rejects this relational identity. Now she is able to understand the duplicity of this identity that is imposed on her by society so that she may restrain herself as a being. But now, women are capable to take the decision herself. She is equal to man in society. She also does not like the support of man in making her own identity and also knowing herself as someone's daughter, wife or mother, rather than seeks separation from these relations and wants to make her own identity that shows her originality. "In India too, both men and women writers have seen women in these relationships. Sociologists regard India as a traditionally male-dominated society where individual rights are subordinated to group or social role expectations. In these roles, personality must not dominate the roles assigned in the societal framework. Consequently, in such a set up, a purely social, platonic or intellectual relationship between man and woman becomes nearly impossible. A woman's individual self has very little recognition and self-effacement is her normal way of life. Indian woman too, as a part of that set up has accepted it and lived with it for ages."⁵ But in modern time she revolts against the conventional/ orthodox image of Indian. She is conscious of herself as a being, not as an

object. A woman is not the "other". She is an autonomous being, capable of through trial and error, finding her own way to salvation. Therefore, a new modern girl is reluctant to play the conventional role of a sex object and a yoked wife. In a sense, she is the symbol of the independent woman.

Bharati Mukherjee is a diasporic writer whose works are based on sense of immigrants. "Bharati Mukherjee's own struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the United States has led to her current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants"⁶. The word immigrant defines a physical movement from their homeland to an unknown land with forward attitude, it indicates an inescapable isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. "The term immigrant and expatriate in general refer to persons who live outside their own country either by choice or otherwise. But in the works of Bharati Mukherjee's these two terms assume distinct connotations. The 'immigrant' willingly transforms herself/himself to fit in and absorb the best in the host culture. The immigrant experience, therefore, becomes a transformative process of the 'self' in its relation to society. The 'expatriate' on the other hand is more a reluctant entrant into the new culture and finds it hard to let go a familiar way of life."⁷ Immigrant is also a kind of exile in which the people shifted from one place to another. The word exile evokes the feeling of detachment, relationships with the mother land and feeling of alienation. There are many types of exile like self-imposed exile, forced exile, political exile, and social exile and so on. In India the migratory movements were started by the labor class and the trading communities.

Mukherjee's writing largely reflects her personal experience and crossing cultural boundaries. In novels such as *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Desirable Daughters*, *Wife* as well as in her short stories, Mukherjee's novels focus on exploring the themes as sense of dislocation, the emigrants feeling of alienation and isolation, discrimination, the mistreatment of Indian women, and exploring identities. Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine*, which explores female identity through the story of an Indian peasant woman. "Her journey through life led Jasmine through many transformations—Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane through large geographical locals like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally towards California. At every stage of her life Jasmine revolted against her fate and the path drawn for her."⁸ The protagonist of this novel suffers a lot. When she starts moving from different place people start calling her from a different names. So this change shows the identity crises. She faces many problems in her journey from India to Iowa. "The past is Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Hasanpur, Punjab, her marriage to Prakash, the young ambitious city man, who always thrashed traditions. Pygmalion-like he had given her a new identity and a new name Jasmine for she was small, sweet and heady and would quicken the whole world with her perfume."⁹ Jasmine willingly undergoes transformation of the self from Jyoti to Jane to Jase to

Jasmine. At every conversion of the personality she stands unyielding in resistance to her providence and destiny. It is not the uncertainties of the new continent that challenge her but the uncertainties of her life in an unknown terra ferma. Her journey to the New World is a huge change in her life. Jasmine, on the contrary, has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. As Meena Shirwadkar has pointed out, a woman on way to liberation trying to be free from inhibition is rarely seen in Indo-Anglian literature. Jasmine has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself. But she has achieved a new identity only through and with the help of her cultural past. She brings death to half-face as goddess kali, she brings happiness to Duff and Taylor as a traditional, self-sacrificing Indian woman and she is offering love To Du as a loving Indian mother who exults in her motherhood. It will take many more years for the likes of Dimple and Jasmine to completely sever their links with their past however exhilarating or exciting the foreign experience may appear to them."¹⁰ Mukherjee's novel characters are very much similar like Dimple and Jasmine their stories are same. She portrait her character as a power which do anything for their surviving. Both the character of Mukherjee is the victims of society.

"In her novels *Jasmine* and *Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee has shows a dual cultural shock. Jasmine and Tara leave their respective countries in search of their dreams. This migration or "cultural transplant" leads to a crisis of identity and final reconciliation to the choice."¹¹ These characters have some dreams in their eyes but after shifting they have mental suffered a lot. Because they are facing many problems for adjustment. Her character is not controlled by one faith, one ethnic, racial or one culture because they are bound to their mother land and India has multicultural country so everybody have their different faiths. "In her novels she try to adapt to American society and how, in consequence, are portrayed as rootless. In these, the novelist seizes upon the moment as it is lived in all its intensity, confession and desperation by people who have broken away from their culture and historical roots."¹² In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Bharati Mukherjee focuses on immigrant's identity. The protagonist of this novel Tara who split-self caught between her inner and outer worlds. She also redefines the notion of identity, notion of culture and notion of home as an immigrant perspective. She defined an Indian woman shocked by her immersion in American culture and, after seven years she returns to India, by a changed Calcutta.

But Mukherjee's novel *Wife* is not based on immigrants experience but woman suffering. Because every woman have a dream of marriage and Dimple expect from her husband that he also involve in this. But he doesn't have time for her. "It is difficult to treat the novel as a study of cultural shock for even while in Calcutta, Dimple is an escapist and lost in her private world of fantasy."? Dimple's vision of Sita's docility, sacrifice and responsibility is a flag with many messages. She wants to break through the traditional taboos of wife. She aspires for freedom and love in marriage.¹³ Actually Dimple is bound in four walls of

house. She feels very lonely because her husband is too busy, she is a typical Bengali girl who is newly married. So she has some desire to spend some time with him, talk with him. But he always neglects her. In the middle of the story she is very frustrating because she feels alone. She tries to break her relationship and separate from him. But because she is an Indian woman. She tolerates everything silently. "Dimple husband Amit thinks that Ina is breaking their marital peace by keeping Dimple talking on phone, and forcing him to eat his breakfast all by himself. When Leni breaks rhinoceros-shapes ashtray, Dimple thinks it is symbolic of her freedom from exploitation by housework and fear for self-expression: "She decided it was best to regard the broken ashtray as an end of an era in her own life. But nowhere in the novel Amit seems to have exploited her by cruelly either burdening her with household work or by neglecting her pleasures in life."¹⁴ Dimple always thinks about her liberty because she feels that her life become very limited. In which nobody comes and goes. "For Dimple the loss of old culture is neither an exciting nor an exhilarating experience. She is disillusioned on all planes—physical, mental and emotional. Freedom from the ponds of caste, gender and family instead of turning her hilarious, leaves her utterly lonely and desolate. Her killing of her husband is partly an act of desperation and partly an outcome of her guilty conscience. Judging herself by the Indian standards of marriage and womanhood, she is uneasy about her extra-marital relationship with Milt Glasser. Unable to cope with the crisis, she kills her husband."¹⁵ She always thinks to separate but she can't. She knows everything about their husband after that she cannot separate with him. At the end she killed her husband. Her intention was not wrong. But because of her husband she takes this action.

"The *Tiger's Daughter* is the story of a rich industrialist's pampered daughter –Tara- who returns to Calcutta "in search of the Indian dream" after seven years in the U.S. Unable to fit into the culture of Calcutta where she grew up, she finds that she us as much of an alien at home as she was abroad. Wife deals with the pre-and post-marital experiences of Dimple Dasgupta-an ordinary- looking, dull, middle-class girl, who fed on film magazines and T.V. serial is unable to accept the unexciting survival that marriage leads her into. Moving to New York only makes matters worse and her psychotic nature finds a final answer only in the gruesome murder of her husband, after planning suicide in a dozen different ways. Jasmine is the story of an uneducated, simple but courageous Punjabi peasant girl Jasmine, who travels, from an inconspicuous village in Punjab, though the breadth of the U.S. in order to fulfil a far-fetched dream. Her determination and resilience help her in the new land. The beauty as well as the brutality of America is encapsulated in the experiences of Jasmine who changes names and identities with equal ease. The first two are unable to come out of their alien status and become an integral part of their new milieu while Jasmine succeeds in experiencing life to the full with all the "exuberance of immigration"¹⁶ All the characters of Bharati Mukherjee

are very much similar with each other. They are fighting for same issue. And at the end they can achieve that position which they want.

Footnotes

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