



Living in ‘the Betweens’: Diasporic Consciousness in Bharti Mukherjee’s Novels

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian-born American writer has carved a niche in Diasporic literature and has successfully portrayed the universal experience of immigration. As she herself faced dislocation two times, her compositions encompass an immense canvas of diaspora issues, i.e. separation, fracture, sentimentality for home, underestimation, racial scorn, social disdain, racial clashes, character emergency, age contrasts, change of subjectivities, development of new examples of existence with diverse cooperation and so forth. Her women immigrants undergo a major and essential change in the process of living in the adopted homeland. All her works reveal beautifully woven narratives in which her protagonists make them bold and assertive to face any kind of situation in the new land and through them, the writer uncovers several diasporic issues. In the present paper, an attempt has been made to investigate or recognize the elements of diasporic consciousness in Bharti Mukherjee’s novels. The paper tries to delve deep into the issue of migration and present the pain, problems and trauma faced by immigrants.

Keywords: Diasporic consciousness, cultural displacement, identity crisis, hybridity, conflicts

Bharati Mukherjee, (1940-2017) an Indian American writer has acquired an important place among the diasporic writers through her writings. As a migrated author she is conscious of the socio-cultural conditions which the characters have to face through different social, cultural, political, and psychological problems and tried to investigate the sociocultural relations of immigrants in the host country and has claimed new possibilities for the social amalgamation and cultural creolization. Each of her works uncovers perfectly woven stories in which her protagonist makes them intense and emphatic to confront any sort of circumstance in the new land or somewhere tries to put forth the elements of diasporic consciousness. In this connection when she was asked, “Do you see immigration as an experience of reincarnation?” Mukherjee’s answer was, “Absolutely! I have been murdered and reborn at least three times” (Connell 1990:18) The thought is visible in her works like *Jasmine*, *Leave it to Me*, *Miss New India* etc. Mukherjee’s short stories and novels bring unique insight and profundity to the immigration, expatriation, and assimilation of South Asians, especially South Asian women, in North America. An insight into her life will provide us a view of the major themes of her work.

Mukherjee was born into a wealthy Hindu- Bengali family in Calcutta. In 1947, her family moved to England, where her father worked as a chemist for four years, and then the family moved back to India. After her graduation from the University of Calcutta and postgraduation in English and Ancient Culture from the University of Baroda, she moved to the United States to attend the Iowa Writers’ Workshop at the University of Iowa. She earned her M.F.A. and PhD from the same University. In 1968, she immigrated to Canada with her husband Blaise and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. She became a professor at McGill University in Montreal. She became a civil rights activist in Canada and wrote about the crippling effect of racism on individuals. The experience of expatriation poignantly manifested in her writings. Her essay *Invisible Woman* is a blistering reflection on her stay in Canada. In 1980 she settled in the United States and began teaching at the university level. In 1989, she became a U.S. citizen. She was professor emeritus in the Department of English at the University of California, Berkeley, until her death in 2017.

Mukherjee is also associated with the issues of assimilation and socialization of immigrants and focuses on the search for identity in their works. Her works reflect two topics the migrant experience and the sentiment of estrangement as an exile and the abuse of ladies in Indian culture attributable to the overburdening desire to adjust to cultural standards and conventions. Her works

The Tiger's Daughter and *Day's and Night's in Calcutta* unfurl her endeavours to discover her personality in her Indian legacy. *Her Wife, Darkness, An Invisible Woman and The Sorrow and the Terror* investigate the outsiders' understanding of bigotry in Canada. *Jasmine and The Middleman and Other stories* investigate the settlers' experience as opposed to sentimentality. She portrays the gathering of East and West through outsider experience. Her early writings gave a pessimistic account of rootlessness and depict the immigrant characters as "lost souls, put upon and pathetic adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong" (*Darkness* XII-XIV), whereas her later writings celebrate "the exuberance of immigration" (*Darkness* XV).

The novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) addresses Mukherjee's personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, the eastern and western worlds. Tara, the chief protagonist, is born in Calcutta, schooled in the United States and married to an American gentleman, David. After spending seven years abroad, the beautiful Tara leaves her American husband behind and comes to India. When she places her foot on the soil of her dearest home, she feels that 'home is no more home' and has changed totally. She finds it tough to adjust to her friends and relatives in India, even with the traditions of her own family. She is welcomed by her relatives as "Americavali", and her husband MLECCHA. Tara was a racial outsider in North America and becomes lonely in her own native land, whereas she was expecting for a long time in America that, "all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta" but contrary to her expectations everything changed created alienation in her mind. Her mother's attitude towards her has changed, due to her marriage outside her religion. Tara feels hurt when she noticed that even her friends feel- "You have changed too much." (105) She feels "in India she was not married to a person, but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden. (62)" Even the Indian language and words faded from her memory. Religion and cultural customs were erased from her memory. She knows well that foreignness of spirit is not permitting her to establish relationships with her old friends and relatives. She questions, "How does the foreignness of spirit begin?" and starts questioning her own identity. Her transformation made her look at the ugly aspects of India i.e. despair, disease, poverty, violence, political unrest, overpopulation, class conflict etc. This can be noticed when she says "everything gone down horribly" (42)

The place she finds on her return full of strikes, riots and unrest is vastly different from the place she remembers. This is to the Naxalite Calcutta of the late sixties and early seventies - one full of riots and protests. When she calls her friends at Catelli to share her decision of going back, she and her friends were trapped by a rioting mob and she lost her two friends Jyotonto Roy Chaudhary and Pronob. Mukherjee here tries to 'typecast' Calcutta by detailing its seamier side and its riots:

“In time, the sidewalks beneath Joyonto grew restless with Refugees from East Bengal and Tibet. Rioters became insolvent. Powerful landowners were at first tormented, later beheaded.” (T.D. 220). In the midst of the chaotic situation she only thinks about her husband David who now becomes a more safe shelter for her. In the end, Tara realized that the two worlds cannot be reconciled, and the alienation from the mother country seems stronger, chooses to return to her husband David and America. She realized that the gulf cannot be bridged; and Tara’s psyche remains split up like other immigrants in the same way as Mukherjee’s own experience of coming back to India with her American husband Clark in 1973 when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of India.

The Tiger’s Daughters shows efforts for adjustments in a new culture. Mukherjee herself admitted that finding a new identity is a really painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born into, and then replanting yourself in another culture. (Indian Express 16) In this way, the writer seems to have probed into the psyche of the culturally uprooted people and she also tries to present some of her own experiences through them. *The Tiger’s Daughter* aptly reflects the diasporic consciousness through migrancy, belonging and characterization.

Wife (1975) is another novel dealing with the theme of an expatriate’s life in a foreign land. It brings a unique experience of an Indian immigrant who fails to assimilate and results in mental breakdown due to her failed quests, thwarted dreams, dislocation and isolation leading to marital stress, the demand of a new and hostile cultural environment, loss of supportive community and loss of a relatively coherent earlier identity. The protagonist of the novel is Dimple Dasgupta, an ambitious young woman who has an intense desire to go abroad and live a luxurious life. She marries Amit Basu whose mother Mrs. Basu does not like her modernity. She does not want pregnancy soon and wants to have a life free from family problems and worries. Enamoured with the luxurious life of the people in the USA, she goes with her husband. She tries to Americanize her life by drinking beer and attending parties. Her excessive watching of TV shows that show rapes, murders, sex and violence, made her mind psychic and she begins to dislike Amit. She develops a friendship with Ina Mullick and Milt Glasser and becomes more and more psychic and suffers from insomnia. She constantly thinks and dreams of death. Finally, she thinks of killing Amit and hiding his body in the freezer. She mixes the fantasy of TV shows with real life. She becomes a split personality suffering from neurosis, schizophrenia and death instinct due to her unfulfilled desires of ambition lust, the pressure of expatriate life and psychological disorder resulting from an imbalance between fantasy and reality. The cycle of expatriation that Dimple undergoes gets her life fully collapsed. She is an immigrant being highly emotional patiently suffering from depression and psychic disorder. *Wife* personifies Dimple as “a psychoneurotic”

before marriage whose problems get aggravated after her migration to the United States of America and she is depicted as the lone female protagonist among all the characters in Bharati Mukherjee's works who feels that she suffers a strong sense of insecurity being a woman.

Her famous work *Jasmine* (1989) reveals the transformation of a village girl of tradition to a modern woman who shapes her identity through migration and her difficulties in the journey and her different identities. Through her, Mukherjee tries to reveal the life of all the immigrants who decided to cast off their old life and search for a dream has to pay a heavy price along with displacement, rootlessness, discrimination etc. in the process of Americanization. It is a story of a girl who lived in Hasnapur, a village in the Jullundar district of Punjab, India where she was born as Jyoti, the unwanted fifth daughter of a poor displaced Hindu family. At the age of seven, an astrologer predicted that she was doomed to widowhood and exile. As a strong and determined girl, she was ready to fight her destiny. Jasmine's yearning for independence from her early childhood marks the beginning of the struggle for self-actualization. She started learning English to empower herself "to want English was to want more than you had been given at birth, it was to want the world". At the age of 14, she marries Prakash Vih, her brother's friend, an engineering student, a modern cityman who has no faith in the traditional role of an Indian wife and he gave her new name 'Jasmine' which reveals when she says "To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine" (77). She gradually moulds herself to the new woman untrapped by traditions. Both plan to go to America to fulfil their dreams. But unfortunately, Prakash falls victim to a Sikh extremist bomb and died. Jyoti decides to emigrate to the U.S to fulfil her husband's dream and wants to perform 'sati' by cremating herself on the pyre of his suit. She somehow made an arrangement for her journey, but on her arrival in Florida, she was brutally raped by the ship's captain. She is unable to bear the pain; symbolically turns into Goddess Kali to slaughter her assailant. She burns her husband's suit outside that motel and indirectly burns her own identity of being an Indian and her Indian past. While she was doing her journey on foot, she was helped by a lady named Lillian Gordon who has helped many immigrants. She learnt the American ways and Jasmine reinvents herself into American identity- Jazzy in t-shirt, tight cords and running shoes in the clothes of Lillian's daughter. After her initiation into American way of life, she moves on to New York and lives temporarily with the family of her late husband's Professor, Devender Vadhera where once again she felt Indianness imposed on her by his wife. To distance herself further from everything Indian she seeks help from Lillian's daughter Kate, to secure a job as caretaker/nanny for Duff adoptive daughter of Columbia University academician Taylor and his wife Wylie Hayes. She falls in love with Taylor and he gives her a new identity 'Jase' for' a

woman who lives for today. Here also her happiness ends, by a strange quirk of fate, she happens to spot her husband's killer Sukhwinder in New York park. She then flees to Iowa and is reincarnated as Jane, wife of 54-year Bud Ripplemayer, an invalid banker in Baden, Elsa County, Iowa. Bud adopted Du Thein; a Vietnamese refugee boy makes her realize her own past but unlike her, he keeps his language and ethnic heritage and language alive by secretly in touch with his community. Later, Bud is shot and crippled by a farmer. In the end, Jane returned to her former companion, Taylor.

Jasmine, the protagonist struggles to achieve herself in the society where she belongs and labours a desire for independence and respect for success that appears incongruous in her Indian setting of poverty gender discrimination and rigid social conventions. As a whole, the novel Jasmine deals with a young Indian widow's successful attempt to reshape her destiny and her happiness in an alien land. From the rural Indian culture, the protagonist Jasmine goes to America where she encounters several difficulties and courageously overcomes them. She constantly changes herself during her life journey, which starts from Jyoti the village girl in Hasnapur, to Jasmine, the city woman, to Jazzy, the undocumented immigrant, to Jase, the Manhattan Nanny, to Jane, the Iowan woman who enters the story and " finally sets to move to California. throughout the novel, she strives to "adjust herself in the American society" and becomes able to settle there, adapts the American way of life and asserts her identity. The state of exile, a sense of loss, the pain of separation and disorientation make the novel oriented towards a quest for identity in an alien land through the main character Jasmine. As she experiences displacement and dislocation in her life, she tends to adapt the foreign culture suppressing the past for a different present. Though she shuttles between past and present, she tries to restrain the past to make her identity coherent and establish the 'self' more assertively. Jasmine is an exile in the fight against the old world of India and its old cultural values. Her sense and sensibilities are actively engaged with the world outside her, leaving no time to reflect on the problems, whether life is meaningful, or why one should think of East, West, North or South when one can be a singular self as culture and history would shape one. But in creating such a character, in attempting to re-locate the character in a desired but alien environment, Mukherjee does not probe the inner consciousness of the protagonist nor does she depict the deeper struggle the Americans undergo in relating to each other. Jasmine takes the bird-view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of values there.

The Holder of the World (1933) is a beautifully written story about Hannah Easton, a woman born in Massachusetts who travels to India and becomes involved with a king gives her a diamond known as the Emperor's Tear. BeighMasters, the narrator of the story is a 32 years old woman

asset hunter by profession. She is appointed by a client to track down a diamond called The Emperor's Tear. In course of her search story, she came to know the story of Hannah Easton's life. The novel is foregrounded in the last decade of seventeenth-century India when the country was undergoing a transition of power from the Mughals to the English. Hannah Easton, a 17th century Puritan woman, was born in Brookfield, Massachusetts, to Edward and Rebecca Easton in the year 1670. After the death of her father, the mother elopes with her Nipmuck lover. Hannah grows up in a conservative Puritan family as an adopted daughter of Robert and Susannah Fitch. Hannah attains fame all around the city through her embroidering works. After her marriage with Gabriel Legge, an East Indian Company employee she comes to India with him. Here she spends time with her Indian maid Bhagmati and comes to know from her about the native people and traditions of the subcontinent. After the death of Gabriel in the sea, Hannah involves in a love affair with Raja Jadav Singh. But her happy life comes to end when Raja is arrested in a fight with Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. She pleads to the Emperor to spare the Raja but Raja was killed and she returned to Salem. Her strong decision of giving birth to an illegitimate child of King shows her transformation. She restarts her life as a mother and named her daughter Pearl without caring for the people of the Puritan society.

Leave It to Me (1997) recounts the tale of a young lady sociopath named Debby Dimatino who looks for vengeance on guardians who relinquished her. The story uncovers her thankless communication with kind new parents and a vindictive quest for her genuine bioparents. The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother daughter relationships through the political and emotional instincts by the main character in her quest for revenge. The birth of Devi Dee is shown in a remote village of Devigaon, India, a local site, she moves towards a large global site that is America through adoption. Again, in order to relocate herself she abandons stable Schenectady society to embrace the Haight's active culture. Initially she has been shown as an abandoned, marginalized, adopted girl child but with the progress of the plot, she assumes a central position of a Goddess, Devi. Devi was born in India, Asia, the place which defines her roots, her location but she has been dislocated right from birth through adoption, which results in her Displacement. It basically explores those complexities that have been born due to displacement and alienation, and "the recession into the past, into moments of gelid history, into moments of darkness, are necessary for the acceptance of an alien site of dislocation" (Atanu 149). This feeling of dislocation fills in her an urge to search for her origins that is her location. This results in the creation of a double identity through difference, "both lived and imagined" (Atanu 148).

Desirable Daughters (2002) is the story of three sisters, Tara, Parvati and Padma, born and raised in a cultured Bengali family of Calcutta in the 1950s and the different paths they travel from this nexus. In this novel, the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming without an end. From their childhood, their parents tried to teach lessons of traditional cultural values of Indian life besides western education. Padma goes against tradition and marries a Bengali businessman. Parvati the middle sister also marries against the wishes of her father but chooses a typical Indian life with her husband and two sons in Bombay. Tara marries a computer engineer, Bishwapriya Chatterjee, chosen by her father and settles in San Francisco. In America, she starts her life as a traditional Indian wife and her regular contact with modern American society ignites in her a strong desire to adjust to the occidental lifestyle. She finds her life caught in between cultural dualism. She breaks all taboos of oriental culture and divorces Bish and develops a relationship with a Hungarian Buddhist lover with her son Rabi. The news of the divorce was not shared by the family members. Bish, who was rooted deeply in Indian tradition and marriage was Dharma for him but he failed in his duty. Tara's American life is disturbed by the sudden arrival of an unknown person. Christopher Dey, claims that he is the illegitimate child of Padma's love affair with Ron Day before marriage. His claim gave a sensitive shake to Tara's pride in their family traditions and cultural norms. Tara comes closer to her ex-husband Bish during her investigation of the case of Christopher Dey and later on reunited. Finally, Tara returns to India to re-evaluate the oriental culture on which her family is based. She no longer fights with her multiplicity but rather accepts it as part of her progressive capacity. The poem in the novel's foreword clearly lays out Tara's mission: "No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, everyone's path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way". (*Desirable Daughters* 104)

In Tara's realization, the novel reveals the spaces of tradition, personal memories places and lifestyles tradition and modernity, locales, nostalgic romanticism of the past, and the inverted story of mobility, existential suffering, hybrid-subjectivity and plurality in her physical and psychic dividedness between rejection to the nativity and incapacity to deal with the new situation that makes the theme of identity more powerful and poignant in the mainstream of American life. (Chhabra 232)

The Tree Bride (2004) is the sequel to *Desirable Daughters*. The novel, *Desirable Daughters* opens with a detailed descriptive narration of the proposed marriage, the death of the husband by snakebiting, widowhood and the marriage of Tara with a tree. This narration of the story of Tara in *Desirable Daughters* connects both these novels as part of the sequel. It ends with the terrorist bomb attack on Tara's house, after which Bish is burnt badly and is crippled but Tara and Rabi

survive. The main target of this attack is supposed to be Bish who has many business rivals due to his successful communication technology company. Tara reconciles with Bish who is presently her ex-husband to whom she has divorced. In this phase of distress, she desires to unearth the mystery of her ancestors. Tara has started writing books and she is working on the story of her ancestor, her namesake, the Tree Bride, Tara Lata. She tries to search for her own roots in India through the history of Tara Lata. The character of *The Tree Bride* is Tara Lata Gangooly, an East Bengali woman who was married to a tree at the age of five after the sudden death of her bridegroom due to a snake bite. Her father married her to a 'sundari' tree to protect her from the curse of widowhood. After her marriage, Tara Lata becomes the legendary Tree Bride and she also developed the characteristics of a tree as she stayed rooted in her father's house all her life. She never left it until her death except for three occasions when she stepped out of it. She devoted her entire life to the service of the poor and actively participated in the freedom struggle of India. Her house remained open to all. Ultimately, she was arrested by the British authorities and was declared dead in police custody. Her death remains a mystery for the people of Mishtigunj where she lived all her life. The novel is presented as Tara's quest for her roots with reference to her relationship with the Tree Bride. In this novel, she along with Victoria tries to trace the intricacies of not only the Tree Bride but all other people associated with her and Mishtigunj explicitly or implicitly.

The last novel *Miss New India (2011)* draws a picture of modern India which shows a girl's desire to find her own place. Anjali Bose, a young tall girl with beautiful features, completed her bachelor's degree in commerce in a village. Her parents wanted her to get married to the selected man, but she feels Job is key to happiness and will bring respect and power. Her wishes were given wings by Peter Champion, her American expatriate Teacher. A small-town girl reaches a big city gets rid of the old conventional ways and discovers her space, her new identity, the identity of being an unrestricted, smart and charming modern girl with an American accent. This transplant is also represented via the change in her name which becomes Angie from Anjali. This makes her feel that she is part of the bold and a new India because in 'old India' women have to limit their identity to the four walls of the house. With the help of Mrs. Desai she redefines her American accent. Then she starts working at call center but this joy was for short time and she returns to her home. Once again, she gathers courage and starts doing work.

In *Miss New India* all the facets of the old and new India have been explicitly shown. Sonali, Anjali's elder sister can be taken as the archetypal of the conventional woman in customary India who is married to someone chosen by her father whereas Anjali, the protagonist is the epitome of

a new and developed India. Mukherjee emphatically portrays the India of the twenty-first century in a digital age where a young Indian girl introduces and modifies American traditions and ethics and eventually decides to stay in the country. With this newly gained maturity, she has understood that there is no need to renounce the past while moving on towards the optimism of a redemptive prospect, “Angie the bold one, the initiator, was beyond blame, or shame. Anjali just watched and let things happen” (226). Therefore, through the protagonist Anjali, Mukherjee shows that she is full of dynamism and vigour and is in the frequent quest for new prospects in modern 21st century India. This tale portrays the savage liberating change that outcomes from movement. The main change is that it isn't from one nation to other but just from Gauripur to Bangalore. Toward the end of the novel Anjali's visit to Gauripur shows her as a significant career-oriented lady. The town has additionally become a creating it Center and is dynamically headed straight toward modernization.

Mukherjee wants to visualize different aspects of cultural dislocation and relocation from an extra dimension that is from the external perspective. How an outsider reacts towards dislocation, alienation and the efforts made for relocation. Though Mukherjee's novels “express the impulses of Indians, who in their search for a better life, face the problems of adaptation and survival” (Devi 244-45). Clifford says ‘Diaspora women are caught between Patriarchies ambiguous pasts and futures. They connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex, strategic ways.’ (Gupta, A K, and Sarita Jain. quoted Clifford :13)

Mukherjee depicts that migration is painful but the reactions of the protagonists are different. Some change and assimilates, and some lose hope and surrender. The immigrants face many problems-dilemma, and cultural identity crises due to changes in language, food habits, dressing etc. Her women immigrants undergo a major and essential change in the process of living in the adopted homeland. For Tara (*D D*), an identity evolves and changes constantly when cultural connections are lost, resulting in the creation of multiple selves. The efforts of maintaining both identities – partly Indian, partly American – make her the hybrid of a new culture that again poses the question of her real identity. Jasmine, Tara and Anjali, Hannah changed herself according to the new identity, while Dimple Das and Debby can't bear this pain. Thus, throughout the novels, Bharati encompasses ideas including exilic existence, a sense of loss, the consciousness of being an outsider, yearning for home, the burden of exile, dispossession and relocation. “She becomes one of the prominent flag bearers of Indian diasporic writing who gives many second-generation immigrant writers a ray of hope in their path of journey.” (Talukder 66) Her works reveal that the lives of immigrants do not have straight lines. They experience a sense of alienation in the host

countries and live many lives. Inspire by their attempts at acculturation, they do remain at the periphery and are treated as others. "Migrants," says Salman Rushdie, "...straddle two cultures ... fall between two stools" and they suffer "a triple disruption" comprising the loss of roots, the linguistic and social dislocation." (279) Encircled by the didactics of outsiders and exiled people, Mukherjee's anecdotal speciality lays centre around the bind of transient elements and the opportunities for ingestion and dismissal in the new world. In a nutshell, it may be said that "no Indian woman expatriate novelist in foreign soil is as remarkable as Bharati Mukherjee for her vivid life experience and a genuine portrayal of it in the form of fiction" (Patil 117). Her works have made a notable contribution to the multi-ethnic writing of the United States and as an author, she has moved topographically from India to Canada and the USA and she is out and worried about transients, disengagements and migrations concentrating on the inescapable results of multifaceted experiences.

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