



19:2 April 2025

Published on 14, April-2025

ISSN: 3049-2688 (Online)

Illustration Of Native Culture And Host Culture: A Critical Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Select Fiction

¹ **M. Parvatha Varthini**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Reg No. MKU22PFOL10508
Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625021(TN-IND)

² **Dr. C. Ramya**

Assistant Professor, Department of English
E.M.G. Yadava College for Women, Madurai-625 014. Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most celebrated writers of the Asian immigrants' experience in America. Mukherjee's work explores the theme of expatriation, immigration and transformation. Her works focus on the dislocated self, which desires to search for home and identity. Diasporic dream, figures prominently in all the fictions of Bharati Mukherjee. The present paper attempts to investigate the complexity of diasporic themes in selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee. This paper critically examines the portrayal of cultural identity in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, a renowned writer known for her exploration of the immigrant experience.

Through an analysis of key novels such as *Jasmine* and *The Middleman and Other Stories* this paper explores how Mukherjee's characters navigate the complexities of cultural identity, adaptation, and assimilation in the context of immigration to the United States. The paper delves into the challenges and transformations faced by her characters, highlighting the tensions between their native cultures and the host culture, as well as the role of personal agency in shaping cultural identities. Mukherjee's works are considered within the broader framework of postcolonial literature and diaspora studies, providing insights into the multifaceted nature of immigrant experiences.

Keywords: Diaspora, expatriate, identity, alienation, nostalgia.

Introduction

Expatriate writings has been regarded as an integral part of Diaspora Studies and not an independent style of literature, like other forms of literature such as African-American Studies, ethnic studies etc. The necessity to identify it as a distinct form of writing has been increasingly felt due to the "marginalization" or "hyphenated" existence of those expatriates who chronicle their shocking experiences of multiple racial discrimination, ethnicity, nostalgia, alienation and like in their writings.

Diasporic literature, particularly Indian diasporic writing in English is the product of colonization and decolonization, the period in Indian history which marks the exodus of large number of Indian people to other nations either because of colonization or search for employment. Diaspora dream, figures prominently in all the fictions of Bharati Mukherjee encompassing numerous temperaments of expatriation like nostalgia, frustration, instability and despondency. In her novels, she investigates the topic of expat-

riation, movement and transformation.

Bharati Mukherjee has been referred to as the “grande dame of diasporic Indian literature”. She occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who are concerned with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her texts are powerful and significant. They are particularly effective in mapping the contours of the new South Asian community in the United States. They provide a lens with which one can view the struggle for identity amongst women. (Edwards, Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee, 2009).

The protagonist of the novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara Banerjee Cartright is an autobiographical account of Bharati Mukherjee. Tara experiences a strange combination of Americanness and Indianness in her psyche. She finds her in such a situation that neither she can take refuge in her old Indian self nor within the recently discovered American self. Mukherjee's second novel throws light on the strange aspect of wifhood in a foreign land. *Wife* tells the story of Dimple, a day dreamer who feels alienated in America where life as an immigrant becomes unbearable, whereas she is compelled to make attempt towards the process of economic, social and cultural adjustment. The third and most accomplished novel “Jasmine” is an account of adaptation and not a defeat. It narrates the story of a Punjabi rural girl, Jyoti who figures against adverse circumstances, comes out victorious and carves out a new life in an alien country.

Immigrant narratives such as Mukherjee's are primarily diasporic in the discourse of ideology, hegemony and imperialism. In the words of Pramod K. Nayar, “In the latter half of the Twentieth century, the writings of transplanted authors such as Bharati Mukherjee, Buchi Emecheta, David Dabydeen, Caryl Philips and Hanif Kureshi have captured the diasporic, hybridized state of migrant communities” (Post-Colonial Literature 187).

Tara, the protagonist of *The Tiger's Daughter* belongs to a traditional Hindu Bengali family, leaves her homeland for higher studies. In America she falls in love with a native and gets married to him. However, her marriage proves to be a disap-

pointing one for her parents who had in mind of her marriage with an aristocrat Bengali belonging to the same caste. Tara lands in India after spending seven long years in America. To her surprise she finds only poverty and turmoil back home. This incident is a reflection of Mukherjee's own experience of arriving in India with her American husband Clark Blaise in 1973, when she was deeply hurt by the chaos and poverty of India. This novel beautifully portrays the theme of conflict between the Eastern and Western worlds.

Tara is born and brought up in Calcutta and goes abroad for higher studies and marries an American gentleman. On her return to her home country she discovers a place altogether different from the Calcutta she remembers - full of strikes, riots and unrest. She aspires to reunite the old world of her father, ‘the Bengal Tiger’ – with the recent one of her husband David. In the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* Mukherjee introduces the protagonist Tara with an intense desire of an ‘exile’ for her ‘home’. She finds it difficult to adjust to her friends and relatives in India, even with the traditions of her own family. She feels alienated even in the presence of her mother. Thus, in the first novel one finds the feeling of alienation of Tara.

Mukherjee's second novel *Wife* narrates the story of Dimple, a seemingly docile young Bengali girl, dreams about her married life. She eagerly awaits her marriage and finally marries Amit Basu. She anticipates a new life for her in America where Amit is planning to emigrate. Being attracted by the culture at home and pulled by the new culture in the adopted land, Dimple gets highly confused to decide how to maintain balance in the conflicting currents. Succumbed to pressure and due to her mental agony she finally takes a drastic step of killing her husband. She is ‘wife’ struggling to break free of her traditions in the USA.

The problem of alienation experienced by the immigrants has been beautifully portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Jasmine*. The novel narrates the success story of a survivor. Jasmine the protagonist, single handedly fights against all odds, becomes a winner and creates a new life in an alien country. Jasmine decides to fulfill the wish of her deceased husband Prakash, who was killed by the Sikh terrorist group. Since

Prakash's dream of pursuing higher studies in the USA could not be fulfilled, Jasmine sets out to Florida. Her arrival at Florida coast marks the brutal murder of Half Face, the Captain of the ship, who raped her and thus a new chapter in her life starts in an alien land where she feels the need to transform herself for her survival. She finds herself chasing the 'American Dream' and becomes Americanised. From Jyoti to Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase and Jane the redefining of herself is an immigrant story of carving out her own space in an alien land.

Bharati Mukherjee's immigrant experiences spells in her writings and evokes the Americans to see the richness of India and Indian, how they create magic in solving the problems of Indian diaspora. Starting from psychological stress or trauma, cultural adjustment, acknowledging roots in order to come to terms with the transformation of identity of the immigrants, Mukherjee's works cover all these aspects. Mukherjee's novels often revolve around characters who find themselves straddling the borders of their native culture and the culture of their adopted homeland. This paper delves into the complexities of this duality, exploring how characters like Jasmine in the eponymous novel and Tara in *Desirable Daughters* grapple with their shifting identities. Through careful analysis of their experiences, this section highlights the challenges of adapting to a new culture while retaining elements of one's heritage.

The process of transformation and assimilation is a central theme in Mukherjee's works. Characters undergo profound changes as they navigate their immigrant journeys, shedding old identities to embrace new ones. By closely examining characters like Mukherjee's portrayal of the protagonist in "The Middleman and Other Stories," this paper investigates the multifaceted nature of this transformation. It explores how characters mold themselves to fit into their new surroundings, often at the expense of shedding aspects of their cultural heritage.

Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* follows the journey of the titular character, a young woman who migrates from rural India to the United States. The paper examines how Jasmine's identity evolves as she assumes different names and roles to adapt to her

changing circumstances. The character's transformations highlight the fluidity of cultural identity and its dependence on external factors. In this section, the paper explores the short stories in "The Middleman and Other Stories" and how they portray the immigrant experience through

diverse characters. The concept of assimilation is analyzed, with a focus on characters who struggle to balance their cultural heritage with the pressure to conform to American norms. The paper also discusses characters who resist assimilation, showcasing the agency individuals have in shaping their own identities.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *Jasmine* highlights her immigrant phase in America.

During this phase, she proclaims and reveals her complete American identity. She throws away her hyphenated identity and totally denies Indian. Hence, Jasmine reflects the ebullience of expatriates and absorption into the American culture and proclaims Mukherjee's total denial of immigrant condition. The major literary works of Bharati Mukherjee have highlighted the immigrant anxiety, their problems and the trauma they suffer due to cultural clash.

All immigrants, including men and women, Asian and Europeans became the victims of these cultural conflicts. Transplantation of human beings from one cultural world to another is always painful and it is more painful to the female immigrants. Bharati Mukherjee is a diasporic fiction writer who holds the migratory experience and has enriched expatriate literary writings. In fact, her experience as an expatriate forms the main source of her writings. Her novels also deals with the issue of identity, the notion of belonging, the feeling of alienation and footlessness, migrations, dislocations and relocations (www.enotes.com).

Her novels are chiselled by her diasporic identity, immigrant experiences as well as her personal experience of being a woman. In her novels, Mukherjee represents India as a postcolonial writer who affiliates with the West and today. She is one of the most acclaimed authors of the postcolonial immigrant experience in America. The woman writers of this period have captured this situation in their works. The theme of femi-

nism finds expression in so many fictions of post-independence women writers who have given voice to women's feelings and problems in their fictions. They have expressed the feelings of women

and their struggle for existence in society. The study aims at exploring the cultural and psychological conflicts in the mind of Bharati Mukherjee's women immigrants while settling down in a foreign country in a new milieu their problems, anxieties, miserable plights in the light of present socio political scenario.

Bharati Mukherjee weaves the different tensions defined by mass cultural expatriation and literary migration to show that the gap between pre and post-twentieth-century pioneers cannot be completely bridged yet can be made narrower through recognition of differences and appreciation of similarities in fellow human beings caught in the painful reality of assimilation and preservation of cultures in their quest for old and new roots (P 44).

The protagonists of Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* is neither typically Indian nor exotically

Westernized. To them America is merely a land of opportunities, a place with financial gains, independence and freedom of movement. What so ever is there, the fact does not take away the diasporic experiences in any way. This process is the search for a voice remains mostly incomprehensible even to the protagonists. The unresolved dilemma of modern woman is a recurrent theme of the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, a widely acclaimed author and winner of the National Book critics Award. She considers her works, a celebration of her emotions that she brings out of her heart.

Mukherjee's novels often depict the tensions between native cultures and the host culture. The paper examines how her characters negotiate these tensions, either by embracing a hybrid identity that combines elements from both cultures or by rejecting certain aspects of their heritage. This analysis highlights the complexities of identity formation within the context of immigration. The paper also explores the intersection of gender and cultural identity in Mukherjee's novels. It examines how female characters, in particular, face

distinct challenges related to cultural adaptation and identity transformation. The exploration of gender roles and expectations adds a layer of complexity to the characters' experiences.

In conclusion, Bharati Mukherjee's novels provide a rich tapestry of immigrant experiences, highlighting the intricate interplay between cultural identity, adaptation, and assimilation. Through characters like Jasmine, Mukherjee portrays the dynamic nature of identity as individuals navigate between cultures. Her works underscore the importance of agency in shaping one's own identity while grappling with the expectations and pressures of

both native and host cultures. Ultimately, Mukherjee's novels offer a nuanced understanding of the immigrant experience and the complexities of cultural identity.

References

1. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Tiger's Daughter*. Chatto, London. 1971.
2. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Wife*. Sterlings, New Delhi. 1975.
3. Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*. Grove Widenfield, New York. 1989.
4. Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, Delhi. 2008.
5. Jain, Jasbir. "Foreignness of Spirit: the World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels. *Journal of Indian Writing in English*, 13, 2, (1985).
6. Kumar, Nagendra. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001.
7. Pathak, R.S. *Indianisation of English Language and Literature*. New Delhi: Bahri Publications, 1994.
8. Edwards, Bradley C. ed. *Conversations with Bharati Mukherjee*. Jackson, UP of Mississippi. 2009.