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## **Diasporic Consciousness in the Select Novels of Bharati Mukherjee**

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### **Abstract**

Bharathi Mukherjee, born in Calcutta, India, on July 27, 1940. She had the privilege of traveling to Europe in her early life. She graduated with honors in English Literature from Calcutta University and got her master's degree from Baroda University. Her fictions reflect the true picture of American society, as experienced by the immigrants of this rich country. Rootlessness, uprootedness, homelessness, nostalgia, cultural shock and struggle for adaptability are some of the major themes of her fictions. Mukherjee in her novels clearly depicts the problems faced by the Indians and other third world immigrants who attempt to assimilate into the American lifestyle. Identity crisis and cross-cultural confrontation has received a remarkable impact since the emergence of the modernist movement in the very beginning of the twentieth century. Cross-cultural confrontation is a great influence on immigrants today. The protagonists of Mukherjee face cultural shock because of their immigration to foreign lands. Her heroines leave their own soil to make their dreams true. In this struggle, they adjust and adapt themselves from the cultural shock in the alien land. Mukherjee makes her protagonists travel to the hopeless and redemptionless part of their life and from there makes them reconcile, fight back and emerge for a new world of order.

**Keywords:** immigrants, adaptability, cultural shock, protagonist, reconcile

Bharati Mukherjee belongs to a group of Indian diasporic writers who have made their presence felt and proved themselves to be the representative voices of the Indian subcontinent. Others in this group are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Rohinton Mistry, M.G. Vassanji, Uma Parameswaran, and Sunita Namjoshi

The South Asian Diaspora acquires a poignant place in immigrant literature representing the immigrants who are from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, or from Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, the Caribbean, Guyana, Great Britain and European countries that trace their origin to the Indian subcontinent. Broadly speaking, the South Asian Diaspora embraces the Indian subcontinent at large in which the Indian Diaspora occupies a strong position. A large number of people of the Indian subcontinent migrated to different countries since ancient times. Migrations were caused by different reasons at different times. Initially, people, mostly uneducated, were forced to migrate to serve as laborers. Then there was another class of migrants who were skilled and

literate and willingly left their homeland in search of new possibilities. Though it was very hard to adjust to a new culture and they had to face many difficulties, yet they treated them as challenges and were determined to make their place in the adopted land. The term Indian Diaspora stands Indian people who have migrated to alien lands and now are inhabitants of foreign countries yet maintaining some connection, however tenuous, with their home country.

Diasporas are directly concerned with homelands and there is a communal relationship between them. Homelands construct diasporas and diasporas, in turn, delineate them in their various aspects. Diaspora literature is a very significant feature of the post-colonial approach. Literally, the very word "Diaspora" stands for "scattering or dispersion of human beings". From the point of etymology, the term "Diaspora" originates from the Greek term dispersion, from "dia" (across) and "spora" (to sow or scatter seeds). The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture, Septuagint, firstly delineated the term "Diaspora" which describes the dispersion of the Jews after the Babylonian exile. In the modern context, the term "Diaspora" is used to represent people who have been dislocated from their native land either through migration or exile.

The diasporic consciousness centers on the process of migration in which the person vacillates between two worlds-one lost and the other coming about. The components of race and culture are an integral part of this consciousness. The intermingling, the confrontations, the adaptations, the rejections are all constituents of two different races and two different cultures coming together and form a vital part of the experience of the person. In ancient times the Aryans with their own value systems and culture arrived in India from Central Asia via other countries like Iran. Then came the Greek invasion which, like the Aryans had a substantial impact on Indian art, literature, and culture. The Muslim invasions of India again enhanced, even revived the art and culture of India. And finally, the establishment and gradual growth of the East India Company had its own impact on Indian civilization and

culture, particularly in the field of education. As English assumed international importance, its influence in the British colonies also grew. Thus some people have a diasporic consciousness within the domain of their country while, on the other hand, some leave their country for various reasons but their mother country always remains alive in their hearts. Generally, alienation, loneliness, homelessness, rootlessness, nostalgia, and quest for identity are the core concepts of diaspora fiction.

The mingling of two cultures, so abundantly found in Mukherjee's writings, is an inevitable and vital consequence of the migrating process. This multicultural and cross-cultural hybridity redefines culture and literature. Diasporic writers are "writing home" not "writingback", that is why they are diasporic. They are not emphasizing the concepts of colonizer/colonized and center/margin. The diaspora writers are more concerned with their social, political and cultural condition. Diaspora subjects have to confront a double challenge, that is, they have to preserve their native culture in order to remain connected to their original roots while simultaneously assimilating the new culture. Traditions, values, religion, customs, and languages of original land are always alive in the subconscious or consciousness of diaspora subjects. Yet on the other side, paradoxically, they also have a sense of belonging to the country of their adoption. The strong association with their inherited land, inevitably present in Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists, runs parallel to their eagerness and enthusiasm to accept a new culture and, eventually, a new identity develops after this process of assimilation. Her women try to develop a proper sense of balance amidst so many social, psychological, and cultural tugs and pull.

Bharati Mukherjee has been described as "the foremost chronicler of the multicultural New America" and holds a conspicuous place among diasporic writers. She has developed a global sensibility that is so well reconciled to both home and host culture that she celebrates it as a politics of space. She is an authentic voice that depicts the genuine spirit of the diaspora for she considers it again instead of a

loss. Cross-cultural confrontations are a major concern of Bharati Mukherjee's novels and constitute the core themes of her works. Her fiction reflects the experiences of immigrants in American society and she focuses on the re-invention of an innovative immigrant woman who adapts to the "new" World.

Mukherjee's novels are full of diasporic sensibility. Commenting on the distinction between expatriates and immigrants, she explains that expatriates have some cultural retentiveness, which is why they think of themselves as a visible minority. On the other hand, it is mandatory for immigrants to adjust to a new cultural and social role and transform themselves in order to assimilate and adapt to their new abode. In fact, her entire literary oeuvre, from her maiden work *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) to *The Tree Bride* (2004), traces the significant evolution of her creative sensibility from expatriate and immigrant.

In the novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara returns her homeland to relocate herself in her native surroundings with the realization that she had trespassed the morality of Bengali Brahmin family by marrying a foreigner. For her, it is an occasion of the reaffirmation of her identity in her homeland with the realization of the guilt of inter-racial marriages. It is an unconscious effort of hers to seek the synthesis of Calcutta and California but in Calcutta, she finds it difficult to enjoy the company of Marwari Nepali women. Her feminine sensibility and immigrant identity do not let her not establish inmate bonds of affinity with the homeland. Staying in her parental home, she recalls the impressions of New York. Even the company of friends is tiresome. Her problem is that she seeks her roots in native traditions but her sensibility is molded in Calcutta. She exhibits her exceptional curiosity to reveal her experience with her friends and it is her desperate effort to establish her foreign identity in the native roots. Her dilemma is not only the dilemma of cultural identity only but also the dilemma of female identity. She feels incomplete without David, her foreign, husband but simultaneously the non-acceptability of her Indian relatives of this inter-racial marriage makes her nervous and guilty. Her suffering is

the outcome of the realization of her duty towards her husband and the responsibility towards her own traditions. The apathy and prejudice of Jyothi Rao Chaudhary and Aunt Jharna make her lose her confidence and induces and uncompromising insecurity. Tara's anxiety is an evidence of the fact that in the life of Indian woman, fidelity to native culture is an externally imposed reality but an inward process of self-consciousness. Her guilt-obsessed psyche manifests when she shows her palm to a 'Tantrik'. Her bouts of nervousness are the manifestations of her own failure to compromise with her position as a Bengali wife of an American. Bharati Mukherjee affirms that in the life of women immigrants, the deviation from cultural roots generates the psyche of self-betrayal.

In *Wife* Bharati Mukherjee with the exceptional sensitivity of feminine psyche, focuses on the psychological fear of Dimple. Dimple adopts withdrawal as a policy and transfers her hopes in the life of Amit. She becomes over-possessive to seek security in the fabric of marital harmony. Her suppressed fury transforms into violence and rebellion. She almost becomes frantic and desperately cries out, "I feel sort of dead inside and all you can do is read the paper and talk to me about food. You never listen, you've never listened, and you hate me. Don't deny it I know you do it. You hate me because I'm not fat and fair" (*Wife* 110). Dimple unconsciously seeks compensation of the "loss" born out of immigration in the loves of Amit. Her neurotic condition suggests that culture provides a purpose and significance to life conditions. Ever since her arrival in America, she realizes that pain has been a part of the new beginning and she never imagined it to be strained like this beyond endurance. Her extreme step of killing Amit suggests a state of moral vacuity where she can't be called responsible. Her extreme act of killing Amit becomes an unconscious effort to save her own ego being lost in the web of hi-tech social construction in California. The pathetic end of Dimple justifies that women in transcultural spaces suffer from the greater loss of their innate affinities with their native culture, religion, and morality.

In the novel, *Jasmine* Bharati Mukherjee constructs the dilemma of a young Punjabi widow who struggles with alternative identities for setting her roots in diverse cultural surroundings. The resistance against cultural apathies and gender discrimination makes her plight more dreadful. On her first arrival in America, she finds herself no better than an outcast because of her helplessness to understand American accents. She finds it difficult to interact with people. She complains, "What a country? What a continent? We passed through was through plagues. I am hungry for news but the discarded papers are characters or language that I cannot read" (Jasmine: 49). In America, her first encounter is with the captain of the ship "HalfFace". Being insensitive to her status as a Hindu widow, she is brutally raped. In this accident, it is not only the loss of her physical self but also the loss of her inner self-respect. It is her first exposure to the world of sex and violence. In this unexpected encounter, she resumes her hidden strength and assumes the role of Goddess Kali and kills Half Face to protect her dignity. She is determined to visit the family of Professor Vadhera with the mission to complete the dreams of her deceased husband. However, in the Vadhera family, the reflections of "artificial Indian-ness" distort her sense of dignity. In order to assimilate in American life, she retains her instinctive Indian values. In the family of Wylie, when she comes to know that Duff is not a natural child of Wylie, she finds herself confused. Her failure to take a strong and stable decision in spite of the positive acceptance of American life is uncontroversial and a manifestation of divided consciousness between her innate feminine sensibility and the quest to reconstruct her lost identity against the oddity, cultural diversity and all-pervasive gender discrimination. Jasmine outwardly seems to be confident in the company of Bud and Taylor but her increasing sense of isolation and the withdrawal from the external world affirms her helplessness to reconcile to distinctive ideologies. Jasmine's odyssey in multi-cultural spaces can be described as a process of self-denial to self-realization. There is ample evidence scattered in the text that she makes ef-

forts to adopt American ways but she unconsciously fails to detach herself from her native Indian sensibility. Her roles as a loving and caring wife, a sensitive mother, and an affectionate daughter contradict with her mission to be an Americanized Indian. She retains her Indian identity and Indian sensibility but she also protests against conservative Indian attitude.

Mukherjee stands today not simply as an expatriate writer, but also as one who personifies the journey that every person who leaves her/his country to undertake the daunting task of creating a home in a new environment and country and culture. Her empathy is directed particularly towards the women characters in her novels as she delineates the complex negotiations that they maneuver as gender, race, and cultures intersect. The evolution that is evident from her first protagonist who was unsure and indecisive to the latest one, confident and focused in *The Tree Bride*, reflects the author's own development and maturity. Bharati Mukherjee stands tall among fiction writers and her voice as a storyteller is considered one of the most articulate ones of our times.

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