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A Thematic Study of Cultural Alienation and Search for Identity in the Novels of
Bharati Mukherjee

Abstract:

As a writer, Bharati Mukherjee needs no introduction. She has created her place in Asian American literature, Canadian literature, Indian literature in English, Post- Colonial literature and diaspora literature. The quality of cultural conflict is one of the main reasons to feel alienated and this quality is present in all the five novels of Bharati Mukherjee. She has an esteemed place in the Indian authors. Although she is writing abroad, but her writing shows the native ethos. My thesis explores the five novels of Bharati Mukherjee from the perspective of Alienation. “ Displacement, assimilation, expatriation and immigration are key words in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee. She has explored her deep feeling of alienation through her creative works. Bharati Mukherjee’s works mostly focuses on the migration, new immigration, alienation, expatriation, Indian struggling women. Through these works she shows her own struggling, first as an expatriate and then as an immigrant. Living in Canada she has face the problem of acculturation, assimilation which we can find in her works. She interprets her reaction and experience as an expatriate. Later when she moved to the U.S.A. her writing also moves in a growing recognition as an immigrant. She shows her experience and reflection living as an immigrant in America.

Keywords: Cultural alienation, Search for Identity, Expatriation, Immigration.

Introduction:

Bharati Mukherjee's novels show these aspects of search for identity and cultural alienation. Cultural alienation is a world event today. The grisly difference between two ways of life leads a person to a feeling of sadness and despair. This could be called a culture shock. When an individual gives up his or her own culture and enters another, his or her importances come into conflict with the new ones he or she finds in the alien land. Bharati Mukherjee never forgets Indian culture and tradition and conveys this as a message in almost all her novels to develop plots. Search for identity and cultural alienation are the most dominating theme in Bharati Mukherjee's novels. The theme of search for identity and cultural alienation are common in the 20th century literary scene. Bharati Mukherjee's novels face search for identity. Bharati Mukherjee's novels discuss the depiction of the development of personal identity of Indian migrant women in the U.S. and their confusion, the dilemma of adjusting between two different cultures. Identification means becoming the same or essentially alike. It also implies certain homogeneity and a coalescence or assimilation. Identification can be at many levels: psychological, sociological, cultural, linguistic or emotional. To alienate means: "to make a hostile where previously friendship had existed." So, in an expatriate writer's case, this would imply a sort of hostile distancing from the homeland, as well as a latent hostility implied or experienced for the adopted country.

Bharati Mukherjee is a world acclaimed novelist of post modern era has taken up the theme of search for identity as one of the major themes in all her novels, describing the cultural, psychological and spiritual despair face by expatriates migrating to other countries in search for fortune. Bharati Mukherjee shows the themes to Indian women particularly the problem of cultural alienation and search for identity. Bharati Mukherjee also describes in her novels the cultural clash between the East and the West. Bharati Mukherjee shows in her novels how the female protagonists try to hold the problem of loss of culture and effort to admit a new identity in the U.S., this cultural transplant leads to a search for identity. So Bharati Mukherjee's novels – *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife, Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Desirable Daughter*, search the symbolic significance of these characters representing Indian migrants to the U.S. All the novels of Bharati Mukherjee discuss the depiction of the development of personal identity of Indian migrant women in the U.S. and their delusion, the suspense of adjusting between two different cultures.

To Show the Problem of Cultural Alienation and Search for Identity in her Novels by Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee tolerated a textual geographical displacement and faced with social and cultural alienation. Her work makes metaphorical reference to 'abolition' and 'unhoused' of the immigrants in their effort to make a future by dealing with the notion of place and displacement in her writings.

The dictionary meaning of the word 'to identify' is to 'become identical', which means becoming the same as or actually alike. The word 'identity' also informs certain homogeneity and integration; in other words, assimilation. Identification can be on many levels; psychological, sociological, linguistic, cultural and emotional. The range to which identification has been achieved on all these fronts will qualify how complete one's identification has been to the new milieu. The search for identity by marginal groups in developing multi-racial societies emerges as one of the major relations in literature.

In Mukherjee's novels not only is expatriation a major theme but it becomes a metaphor for deeper levels of alienation like entitative alienation and self-separation which results in exile.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel in *The Tiger's Daughter* Tara comes back home after seven years in America. In it, Mukherjee seems to be helpless to work out her form from her psyche. In order to do so, she makes a metaphorical trip back to Calcutta of the late sixties and early seventies with Naxal riots and resistances. This novel illustrates her hostility with vague alienation to both India and Canada. The novel shows her double alienation. In North America, Tara, in fact, felt herself as an alien where she was racially an outsider. In India, she was not married to a person but to a foreigner and the foreigner was a burden. Thus, there her alienation is at two levels. In the end, the two worlds cannot be accepted. As the alienation from the mother country seems stronger, Tara chooses to return to David and America. Tara realizes that America has transformed her completely:

"Tara's westernization has opened her eyes to the gulf between two worlds that still makes India the despair of those who govern it." (The Tiger's Daughter)¹

Bharati Mukherjee's *Tiger's Daughter* reveals the confrontation between illusion and reality. Tara being an immigrant, away from home, idealizes her own country and adjusts nostalgic memory of it. Tara was packed off by her father at the early age of 15 for America. In America, she experienced homesickness. Little things pained her and she sensed differentiation everywhere. She prays to Kali for her strength so that she would not break before the Americans. New York drives her

to despair.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel in *Wife*, it can be seen that Bharati Mukherjee was going through her hostile stage in Canada. The Novel shows her cultural alienation, and marginality leading to a feeling of expatriation from her heritage in the character of Dimple. In Dimple's case, the expatriation culminates in a terrible brutalization of her psyche and a scanning of her character. Her efforts to adjust to life in New York culminate in Culture shock.

Dimple in *Wife* dreams of a free flat. But actually in America "she was much worse than ever, lonelier, more cut off from Amit, from the Indians, left alone with borrowed disguises, she felt like a shadow without feeling". (*Wife*, p. 200) Later she begins to get angry her own patience. She feels she is falling apart. She is driven to despair, madness, and violence. She kills her husband (Amit) with the kitchen knife. She is an alienated being undergoing the supposed after-effects of cultural alienation – psychosis, psychosomatic disorder, guilt and consideration of suicide.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel in *Wife* the cultural and social large distance dividing the two worlds- India and America – makes her feel disconsolate and lonely due to dull existence in the apartment. She used to contemplate on the methods of suicide. She becomes depressed and neurotic. She feels neglected by her husband. Dimple seduces Milt Glasser and it becomes a traumatic experience for her, who feels change after her act of hoax to Amit. It gives her strength to reject India. Jasbir Jain in "Foreignness of Spirit: The World of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels" states that it is very difficult to treat the novel *Wife* related to a theme called culture-shock or cultural confrontation. Jasbir Jain says:

"Dimple's dreams are very vaguely related to independence or self-realization but more directly related to a sexual awareness, to the sexual power a woman can exercise and how she can successfully step out of the limits put down by the Sita legend ... The reasons or causes for

*Dimple's neurotic behavior are not sufficiently elaborated ... Even the cultural conflict does not adequately account for Dimple's behavior."*²

It is quite true that her isolation is not rooted in loneliness or in cultural differences but in her miff from her own past and her own inner being. But when a person visits an unknown land, he or she is an outsider in a no-man's land. There he or she has to struggle a lot for his or her survival. The discovery of a new self makes him/her forget his/her native culture. On return to his or her native lands he or she finds himself/herself alien in his/her

native land by having lost his/her native roots. His/her mind is again torn apart between the cultural clashes of two environments. He/she is forced to fight with his/her echeloned personality. Therefore, it may be taken that Dimple's case is related to this alienness in a new culture with her echeloned personality which is the result of cultural void or divide.

An important concern of the post-colonial literature is related to place and displacement. The concern with identifying a relationship between self and place leads to search for identity. The self may be destroyed either because of disorder or because of cultural infamy. Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back* says:

*“Beyond their historical and cultural differences, place, displacement and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all Post-colonial literatures in English.”*⁴

Bharati Mukherjee's novel, *Jasmine* searches her identity as difference, as a multiply split subjectivity: Jyoti/Jasmine/Kali/Jase/Jane. In Bharati Mukherjee's world, Jasmine empowers her in an alien culture after having been raped by Half-Face. She does not remain Jyoti (light) but recognizes her overabundance only after the violence – the rape. After the violence, she gives up her identity and recognizes within her jasmine, the caregiver and also Jase, the fireless adventurer. She becomes a migrant and a hybrid and roam between different identities including the truthful Kali, the killer of Half-Face. It is through her internalized mode of India that Jasmine works out the theory of Karma and Kal (time). For the theory of Karma, she brings forth the senseless mode of her thinking. She says: “My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter” (*Jasmine* 40). As a fighter and adapter, and even after so many transformations of herself into different names, she still asks, “Who I am” (*Jasmine* 197). She quotes the words of Karim who says about her: “I am tornado ... How many more shapes are in me, how many more selves, and how many more husbands” (*Jasmine* 215). Here she describes the inner pangs of an exile and an migrant who lives in America. Bharati Mukherjee's novel *The Jasmine* are mainly migrant novel. *Jasmine* is the story of an immigrant from the Third World to the United States who had been uprooted and re-rooted in an alien soil, America, where she has to confront uncertainties. Pushpa N. Parekh in “Telling Her Tale: Narrative voice and Gender Roles in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*” says:

“As the Jasmine-Jane protagonist learns to cast herself in different roles, she finds her initial identity in America immuned in the volitional silence and invisibility of a law breaker in two senses. She is an illegal alien who has defied the immigration laws

and a murderer who defies the ruthless violence of a male-powered capitalist society."⁵

Bharati Mukherjee in *The Holder of the World* shows an immigrant, Hannah Easton from America who came to India and assimilated herself in its culture. Beigh Master is the narrator of the story. Hannah is so much attracted by the Indian culture that she transforms herself to become the mistress of a Hindu Raja Jadav Singh. *The Holder of World* is also a story talk about dislocation and transformation arising due to the clash of the two different culture namely the east and the west.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel in *The Holder of the World*, Hannah is a superb creation, a bold mind and search for identity in strange surroundings, a timeless creature trying to sustain in a strong inhumanity defined society. Her difference from other lies in her ability for establishing compositeness across cultural boundaries. Ostracism opens up unwalled worlds for her. She feels unfinished, formless until she reacts to the reality around her. She is different because she is still connected to the emotional realities of human life at all levels and places. It is her openness to experience and connectedness to human beings that enable her to survive and identify her at any time or any place to be a Salem Bibi.

Bharati Mukherjee's novel in *Desirable Daughters*, Mukherjee talks about the changing social milieu and identity crisis in Bengali community in British India. Her characters like Tara, Padma, and Parvati do not consider westernization or Americanization as a conscious renunciation of their own group identity to Mukherjee Bengali Brahmin identity. S.P. Swain in "Problems of Identity: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*" admits:

*"This novel (Desirable Daughters) is not just an idyllic tale of the three desirable daughters (sic) and their divorce circumstances of upbringing but it is a complex transitional narrative commenting on the intricate and enigmatic process of growing up and of the feminist struggle of these three sisters to stick to their own protean self, their cultural moorings in times of crisis."*⁹

Mukherjee herself says that: "as a writer, I have to find metaphors for talking about the psychic violence of up-rooting and re-rooting." The physical violence can take either the form of sexual violence or of actual homes burning down. Mukherjee introduces violence, a kind of psychic violence in Tara, Dimple, Jasmine and Hannah.

A loss of self-esteem is one of the commonest experiences of women in all cultures. Women in general become trapped in a self-destructive gender-based situation not because

they form a destructive relationship but because the relationship is thrust on them as is the case with Jasmine, Dimple, Tara, Hannah and so on, who are compelled to accept exploitative relationships because of parental, religious or cultural authority. The pressure of the male power as experienced by Jasmine by the brutal rape by Half-Face, and Dimple by her materialistic husband who fails to read her mind, Hannah by Gabriel Legge and Tara by Andy so on, often frustrates the redemptive exercises initiated by women. These are fictional accounts of women's struggle in their culture or in an alien culture.

Conclusion

In Mukherjee, one can find a common, shared focus on ethnic group struggling for identity. She shows how the ethnic groups strive to retain their identity by upholding traditional values and customs as well as seeking assimilation in a multi-racial, modern, and changing society. The novelist reveals the process of change and the contradictions that stem in the period of flux.

Diasporic experience is a double identification that constitutes hybrid forms of identity. Such forms of identity differ from the essentialist notion of national and ethnic identity. It also explores multiple belongings that enable people to inhabit more than one space at the same time.

Bharati Mukherjee claims to have experienced an anti-Indian attitude. Canada's malevolence to Indians and the non-identity of her writings in Canada are the twin periodic themes in her novels. She observed herself as a psychological expatriate in Canada and clung to her ethnic identity. In fact, Bharati Mukherjee had to come to terms with her own identity in an alien land, caught as she was between two conflicting cultures. Therefore, Bharati Mukherjee's novels show the theme of identity and the dichotomy in her temper to her homeland and also with the paradoxes and contention in the immigrant psyche. Bharati Mukherjee's novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Desirable Daughters* reflect a world that refuses to hold together both at the individual and cultural levels. These are the novels of and about isolation. The protagonists Tara and Dimple are pre-occupied in exploring the nature of their own identities. They remain voiceless. Their voiceless emotions arise out of a questioning of cultural issues.

Bharati Mukherjee's women find their ethnic and American identities. They have to find their identities with self, with the wonders, with tradition, and horrors of a new culture, with hopes, desires, growing aspirations. However, her growing concern is that these new born identities should not suffer from the horror and terror of marginalization. Mukherjee's

women evolve from the homesick as Tara returns home to find her alienated and Dimple's and Jasmine's confusion turns violent to kill Amit, and Half-Face.

These rigid changes that have taken place through the late twentieth century into the twenty first century have given rise to a relatively new set of complexities regarding self, identity and alienation. The people are hungry for meaning, identity, for some purpose in human experience, for some roots in existence, for some protection against anxieties and frustrations. But as the forces of cultural and societal expectations are a large obstacle to overcome, the individual self finds itself in a state of conflict. The disparity between what an individual want to desire for and the societal expectation is wide. This lack of compatibility between the self and society is the essence of Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

In Bharati Mukherjee's world, the issues of diaspora globalization, consumerism, transnationalism, cultural hybridity, cultural alienation, search for identity and identity crisis have become the leit motif due to cultural dislocation. In the quest for identity, the self is dislocated in space and time from its roots and has a homing instinct, the desire to discover its 'inbetweenness' in a transnational and trans-cultural space.

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