

Diasporic Female Identity in the Select Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

Dr. Maitry Mohan Bain*

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee as a Diasporic writer has given a new direction to Indian writing in English. So as a Diasporic writer she expresses her personal experience as a woman immigrant. She has played a significant role in typical Indian feelings of women and feelings of immigrants through her writings. Quest for self-identity is the basic concern of her female protagonist. This paper mainly focuses on two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee. She highlights the condition of Asian immigrants in North America and Canada they are searching for their identity in an alien land. Bharati Mukherjee herself has experienced the agony of nostalgia and solitude which are express in her writings. Bharati Mukherjee highlights the concept of identity, nostalgia, deconstruction of self, adjustment, disappointment of expatriation, cultural transformation, dislocation, and negotiation. So, these are the issues that are present in her novels. It examines the feelings of isolation rootlessness and alienation. The works of Bharati Mukherjee focuses on the thematic analysis with special attention on cultural transplant which leads to an identity crisis. She defines women identity within the parameters of social structure. Bharati Mukherjee tries to study the phenomenon of immigration, the status of new immigrants, the feeling of rootlessness and alienation, experienced by her women characters in *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Jasmine*.

Keywords: Alienation, Diaspora, Experience Immigrants, Quest for Identity, Rootlessness, Women.

Introduction

This paper explores the indulgence and struggle related with being an emigrant writer. These diasporic writers interpreted various issues which generated by the experience of immigrants such as dislocation, disintegration, loneliness, identity crisis, rootlessness, marginalization, cultural clashes, discrimination and many others problems are mainly portrayed in Indian Writing in English. In Bharati Mukherjee selected novels, the problem of women and the difference between ancient society and modern society is highlighted. In India, since ancient times, a woman is considered to be a goddess; on the other hand, a woman is also exploited at different levels in society. In the Indian society, women are seen to be associated with the honour of the family. It is believed in Indian society that dignity of family is only in the hands of women at home. The family's honour is based on the character of the daughters. The daughter's character has an influence on the fame and popularity of the family. This study deals with the problems of Indian expatriates' women and their diasporic experience. Bharati Mukherjee discusses the migration experience and lifestyle of Indians in foreign land. The most important themes of diasporic writers are the feeling of nostalgia for their native land and sense of rootlessness with homesickness. This paper focuses on Bharati Mukherjee 's two novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Jasmine* (1989).

The novelist explores her sense of hostility in Canada where life as an immigrant was intolerable, that forced her to make an attempt towards the process of social, psychological and cultural adjustment. Her character starts accepting the new things which they never before face in their life. They gradually accept foreign society and their culture, because of acceptance they start living in dual identity. In that situation neither they belong to their original culture nor their accepted culture. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the major novelists of Indian Diaspora who has achieved a renowned position in Indian writing in English.

“The contemporary literature which deals with emotional problems clearly reflects the pathetic condition of the modern man. Getting uprooted from the native cultural traditions and values, the loss of indigenous language, men position as a mere outcast or an unaccommodated alien, together with multiple injuries and lacerations of the psyche, all account for the theme of identity atrophy.”¹

Bharati Mukherjee mainly pays an attention to the feminine problems in her writing, especially on those women who are suffering from personal identity, misbalanced psyche, cultural shocks and conflicts of traditional values in the foreign land. As an immigrant, Bharati Mukherjee herself faced many problems like an identity crisis, cultural clash. Through her characters, she reveals her personal experiences in her writings. Her female protagonist suffers with the problem of immigration but with that, they have ambition to make their identity and establish themselves in a foreign land.

Corresponding Author: Dr. Maitry Mohan Bain
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt P.G College, Rehli
Mail Id- maitremohan12@gmail.com

The term Diaspora was used to put forward to Jewish dispersal situations that occupy the experiences of outcast workers, refugees, exiles, immigrants and cultural communities. The Diaspora writers have enriched English literature with their notable assistance. Their work deals with the problems of exiles, immigrants and refugees.

“People of Diaspora consciously choose to migrate to alien country of their choice severing their roots from their native community as well as from their native state with the hope to live a happy life there. Diasporic writers document the experiences of such people perhaps to make the sensitive and insightful readers rethink the issues of race, nationalism and national culture in international perspective.”²

A Diaspora is the group of people who are living away from their homeland and settle down somewhere else. Diasporic works shows the problems of immigrant which they are facing in foreign land. Diasporic writers share their personal experience through their works. This literature mainly focuses on the themes like, cultural shock, problems in adjustment, adaptation, identity crisis, alienation, uprooting and re-rooting, feeling of nostalgia, displacement, dilemma, and depression. These Diasporic writers focus on these issues and discussing their own physical and emotional conflicts between two societies. Indian English novels depict Indian life and culture of Indian society which resembles the problems of individual's life and it's determined by society.

“The New Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘Diaspora’ (noun) as the dispersion of the Jews after the exile, among Gentile nations; Jews so dispersed. Etymologically ‘dia’ means ‘thought’ and ‘speiro’ mean ‘to scatter.’ Now, it is being used in a more generalized sense to refer to the migration of a population or a section of it, along with their ways of life to the place of destination abroad.”³

Diasporic Literature is a very vast concept. The term Diaspora that includes all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works is associated with native culture.

“The concept of ‘Diaspora’ and its geographical and territorial dimensions have all been subject to various interpretations (Braziel and Mannur 2003). According to Vertovec (1997:277) the term ‘Diaspora’ is often applied to ‘describe practically any population that is considered “deterritorialized” or “transnational”—that is, which has originated in a land other than which it currently resides in, and whose social, economic, and political networks across the borders of nation-states or, indeed, span the globe.’ It is therefore evident that geographically, ‘Diaspora involves a radical... redefinition of place. To the ancient Greeks, Diaspora was associated with migration and colonization’ (Cohen 1997: ix). However, for Jews, Africans, Palestinians and Armenians, the term had a more ominous connotation: ‘Diaspora is signified as a collective trauma, banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived-in exile.’”⁴

Indian diaspora is one of the sources to spread the sense of Indian tradition and culture all over the world. Their diasporic identity is related to multiculturalism and transnationalism. The idea of diaspora is so diverse in nature. There are different approaches to describe diasporic phenomena. According to Cambridge Dictionary (1995) “Diaspora is a group of people who spread from one original country to other countries”. The term Diaspora comes from an ancient Greek word meaning “to scatter about”. ‘Diaspora consists of and is conditioned by specific historical moments, and as the etymology of the term itself suggests, are scattered and regrouped into a new dialogism with metropolitan centres or other such sites, into ‘new points of becoming.’⁵ The people of diaspora exactly do; they scatter from their homeland to another place where they spread their culture.

Indian fiction writers have been widely recognized for their works of writing. The writers of the Indian diaspora are Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri. The Indian diasporic fiction which emerged out of several social and cultural backgrounds has achieved an important place in the present day. All diasporic writers' works are based on social, political, economic, cultural issues which are part of our society. Indian novels depict the Indian life and culture of Indian society which resembles the problems of an individual's life and it is determined by society.

“Indian Diasporic Literature in English problematizes the concept of nation, religion, identity, gender, marginalization, assimilation and acculturation in exploring the experiences of diasporic life. It focuses on experiences of women within families and the arena of paid work to bring out the realities and meaning of women's lives. Evident in the works of diaspora writers is the greater ability of the females to adapt, assimilate and acculturate in a new environment. While as the male sensibility looks back with nostalgia at the culture left behind, women welcome the newfound freedom in the new environment which is free from the constraints and restraints of phallogocentric taboos prevalent back home.”⁶

In this way Indian novels reflect typical Indian feminine sensibility, identity crises, and cultural clashes. These types of themes can be easily identified in works of immigrant writers of Indian English literature. Bharati Mukherjee's novels deal with the problem of female suppression but on the other side she gives a new identity to the women of modern times. She portrays the character of Jasmine and Tara Banerjee as the new woman who adopts the new lifestyle in an alien country. They make their identity in new groups that are shaped by the culture and tradition of their adopted countries and also influenced by their homeland.

“Bharati Mukherjee’s novels, we get a graphical pattern of a female immigrant’s self-satisfaction in proportion to the approach she adopts to deal with the dilemma of being out-rooted but still connected. Significantly, it is the revised or modified forms of these concepts that define their typical existence.”⁷

These types of themes can be easily identified in the works of immigrant writers of Indian English literature. Bharati Mukherjee’s novels deal with the problem of female suppression but on the other side; she gives a new identity to the women of modern times. This chapter tries to highlight how Bharati Mukherjee portrays the character of Jasmine and Tara Banerjee as the new women in an alien country. She is a well-known immigrant writer. She was born on July 27, 1940, in a wealthy family. She got married to Clark Blaise and moved to Canada.

“Bharati Mukherjee has been regarded as one of the most promising novelists. Born in 1940 in an extraordinarily intelligent upper-class Hindu Brahmin family, Mukherjee was given ample academic opportunities. After receiving excellent schooling, she went to England with her family as her father got a job there. This gave her opportunities to perfect her English language skills. She earned her B.A Hons from the University of Calcutta in 1959 and a Master’s degree from Baroda in 1961. Having planned to be a writer since her childhood, Mukherjee went to the University of Iowa in 1961 to attend the prestigious Writer’s Workshop. In 1963, she impulsively married Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer after only two week’s courtships. Her fourteen-year stay in Canada was one of the hardest in her life as she experienced discrimination and was treated as a member of the “visible minority”. She sees Canada as hostile to its immigrants and opposes the concept of cultural assimilation. In 1980 she moves to the USA, became a permanent resident and has held various posts in colleges and universities. She uses her varied experiences of life into “new immigrant” literature.”⁸

Some of her notable works are *The Desirable Daughters*, *Jasmine, Wife*, *The Tree Bride*, *The Tiger’s Daughter* etc. She deals with the contemporary women struggle and cross-cultural crisis are the main issues in her novels. Self-Empowerment of *Jasmine* the title character’s identity along with her name changes again and again from

“Jyoti Vidh—Jasmine—Jase—Jane and even Kali are the various names adopted by the protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s third novel *Jasmine*. A simple peasant girl from Hasanpur in rural Punjab, Jyoti becomes Jasmine when she marries Prakash, a modern city man who believes in trashing traditions and declares impatiently: “There is no room in modern India for feudalism.” Jyoti thinks of Prakash as Prof. Higgins who can break “the Jyoti I’d been in Hasanpur and make a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name; Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.”⁹

The novel *Jasmine* is based on the character of Jyoti. Bharati Mukherjee portrays the character of Jyoti who suffers a lot by the society. But after the death of her husband, she moves to Florida. There she faces many problems like “As soon as she enters, she has been raped by Half Face, the Captain of the Ship in a hotel and she murders him to avenger her dishonour. She decides to struggle for her survival forgetting her personal dishonour in order to fulfil her mission.”¹⁰ She is a traditional Indian woman but when comes to respect she do anything like she killed a man who raped her. She takes her revenge by killing him which shows the power of Indian Woman. They do anything for their self-respect. She says “To break off the past, he gave me a new name: Jasmine. He said, “You are small and sweet and heady, my Jasmine. You’ll quicken the whole world with your perfume.” Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities.”¹¹ Actually, she finds herself between the dual identities (Jyoti to Jasmine, Jase, Jane and more). She is confused between tradition and modernity because she is partially involved in both. Bharati Mukherjee tries to focus on the immigrant problems which they are facing in a foreign land.

The second novel of Bharati Mukherjee is *The Tiger’s Daughter*. In which she highlighted the issue of Displacement, cultural alienation, rootlessness, cultural clash, woman identity and emigrant issues. Tara Banerjee is the protagonist of this novel. Tara’s displacement is happened from her native country to foreign land and she returns after seven years to her home land. In the context of this novel, displacement is a big change in one’s life because it is a relationship between self and place.

“Tara Banerjee, a Bengali Brahmin of Calcutta and the daughter of an industrialist known as Bengal Tiger, schooled at Poughkeepsie, New York and married to an American named David, who is a writer. After her marriage, Tara becomes Tara Banerjee Cartwright and makes a trip home to India after being there for seven years. When the twenty-two-year-old Tara visits India, the alien western culture which has almost become a second self to her is constantly in a clash with the culture to her native soil. The clash is deeply felt in the psyche of Tara who finds it difficult to adjust with her friends and relatives in India and sometimes with the traditions of her own family. The greatest irony of her return is that she feels lonely in her native land. Her new self is no doubt responsible for this disruption of her pleasure, but the deteriorating social changes, and her new perspective towards the poverty and dirtiness in India.”¹²

She makes her identity in a foreign land. This is only the reason she could not adjust in her native land. When she saw the realistic picture of Indian society. She feels that the country and the place which she leaves before seven years are not same. Tara finds herself in a critical situation, because she could not adjust in her family and friends.

“She depressed and disgusted with the deteriorating situation of India and her new personality finds herself difficult to adjust with the situation and finally wishes to go back to the USA to her husband, but she becomes a victim of violence, her mind is preoccupied with her husband David in America.”¹³

At the end of the novel Tara goes back to America because she can't adjust in India and when she realizes the changed situation of India. She decides to leave India, which shows she lost her interest towards her native country. In this novel, Bharati Mukherjee shows life of Indian people, their struggle and suffering and when Tara lives in that environment, she feels very uneasy because she does not get adjusted in Indian society and she starts comparing India and America's living style and situation. Finally, she finds that American life is better than Indian life. As compared to India, American life is so relaxed, without any struggle and suffering.

She decided to go back to America. “Tara thought, In India, she felt she was not married to a person but a foreigner, and this foreignness was a burden. It was hard for her to talk about marriage responsibilities in Camac Street; her friends were curious only about the adjustment she had made.”¹⁴ Indian tradition has proper criteria of marriage and all Indians are bound to follow the rules, if someone breaks these rules our society will not accept it. Here same situation with Tara Banerjee too. Bharati Mukherjee covers all the aspects of social problems which are present in our society. Through her protagonist, she describes the situation of Indian immigrant women in her novels.

Conclusion

Her characters are full of emotions, loyal, innocent, and kind in nature. She portrays very simple and shy characters in her novels. Most of her characters belong to Indian villages. Bharati Mukherjee portrays very realistic picture of Indian village and the typical villagers. She also highlights problems which girls really face in villages. Bharati Mukherjee depicts Indian values, culture, ethics, myths, social and cultural issues in her novels. All her characters suffered from the same problems and they all are modern but because of their family past they are still connected with their roots and also believed on their family myth, which has been continue from their past generations.

References

1. Sharma, Kavita, et al., editors. *Interpreting Indian Diasporic Experience*. Creative Books, New Delhi, 2004, p. 185.
2. ² Ibid, p. 172.
3. ³ Ibid, p. 66.
4. ⁴ Raghuram, Parvati, et al., editors. *Tracing an Indian Diaspora: Contexts, Memories, Representations*. Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2008, p. 2.
5. ⁵ Singh, Manjit Indra. *Contemporary Diasporic Literature*. Pencraft International, New Delhi, 2007, p. 10.
6. ⁶ Anand, T.S. *Literature of Indian Diaspora*. Creative Books, New Delhi, 2010, p. 82.
7. ⁷ Ibid, p. 59.
8. ⁸ Ibid, pp. 98-99.
9. ⁹ Dhawan, R. K. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, A Critical Symposium*. Prestige Books, New Delhi, 1996, pp. 148-149.
10. ¹⁰ Sharma, Kavita, et al., editors. *Interpreting Indian Diasporic Experience*. Creative Books, New Delhi, 2004, p. 174.
11. ¹¹ Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*, Virago Press, London, 1989, p. 77.
12. ¹² Dhawan, R.K. *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee, A Critical Symposium*. Prestige Books, New Delhi, 1996, p. 54.
13. ¹³ Ibid, p. 54.
14. ¹⁴ Mukherjee, Bharati. *The Tiger's Daughter*. Penguin Books, Gandhi Marg, New Delhi, 1971, p. 62.