

Predicament of the Immigrants in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee: A Bridge connecting past and present

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Abstract

Immigration debates flood news sources in the present-day world, but not too many people are aware of the harsh realities of the immigrants who flee their homeland in search of new opportunities and often end up shove to the margins. Immigrant writers like V.S Naipaul, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri enlightens on the issues and life of immigrant and develops a connection between them and the world. In the world of immigrant writing Bharati Mukherjee is considered as one of the eminent writers, whose work offers up a valuable, varied glimpse into what life is like in an alien land of the immigrants. Mukherjee through her fiction expresses the experiences of the immigrants in a new place, stimulated by the confusion caused by the meeting of two or more worlds. Immigration is an outcome of colonization and decolonization. Large number of people migrated to the other countries due to social or economic reasons, but one thing they share in common is the painful loss of one's native land, tradition, culture and everything they possess, it is a loss that they never forget. The following paper aims to discuss the predicament of immigrant's life, their experiences that connects to their past and present in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee.

Key Words: Immigrant identity, Isolation, Alienation, Rootlessness, Cross cultural conflict, Acculturation

Introduction

Immigration is a process or activity of coming to settle in a foreign land that is not one's own. Immigration not only leads to separation from one's native homeland, but also influence the way an immigrant relates herself or himself, to the homeland and to the newly acquired alien land and its culture. The impact of immigration is much more than one can assume. The physical, cultural uprooting can affect the offspring of the first-generation immigrants. They may feel torn between the old and the new cultural values. When the immigrant arrives a foreign land, they have only

two options left with them. They can either assimilate completely into the host culture by forsaking their own native culture, language and lifestyle or to cling to their original culture. Both the options fail to solve the problems of immigrants at the practical level and they have to undergo the process of hybridization of native and foreign cultures, that further gives rise to the quest of identity. Michael Cronin says, "The condition of the migrant is the condition of the translated being. He or she moves from a source of language and culture to a target language and culture". (Cronin 45).

Bharati Mukherjee also spent fourteen years in Canada, which was the hardest time of her life, she faced discrimination and felt like a visible minority in America. As an immigrant she has revealed her life, her dreams and aspiration for a settled life through her novels. Mukherjee's writings are display of strong anchorage of Indian background, she advocated both her Indian and American cultures at the same time. As a diasporic writer she has been praised as well as criticized for her writings. Although she tries to be impersonal while detailing her protagonists, but has been criticized several times due to the portrayal of her female characters as inevitable and tragic victims who suffers cultural alienation. The female protagonists suffer mental, social and psychological insecurities in attempt to get connected to the new American society. Mukherjee's Immigrant undergo a series of transformation of identities due to the social, cultural changes as well as the traumatic and violent experiences of displacement. For an immigrant the loss of native culture, tradition, family, language, clothing and anything that belong to her place of origin can contribute to the transformation of identity.

Mukherjee's immigrants turn nostalgic due to their desire to return to their homeland. As they carry with them the old memories entrapped in the culture and tradition. This essence of their own land does not let them feel comfortable in the new land and there is always a craving for the past time. The native land of the immigrants always evokes the feeling of alienation in the alien nation. They suffer loneliness in the quest of identity and assimilation in the new land. When an immigrant crosses the border and move from one country to another, their identity also takes a new form and shape. The immigrants have no permanent escape from their past, there is always an echo of call from their past, a desire always exist somewhere within their mind and soul to return back. When there is displacement of a person from an existing cherished and amiable world to an unknown alien world, although full of hope and aspiration, the dislocation brings with itself several drawbacks. The immigrants are not only cut off from their roots, plunge in the vacuum of a space which has no solid base, where they can stand comfortably calling it completely their own. They oscillate to and fro like pendulum and sometimes cling towards their old land and sometimes towards the new ones. The immigrants due to their connectivity to their past and present always experience alienation, displacement, loneliness, acculturation and nostalgia and identity quest. Likewise, Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* crosses the boundaries of her nation, race and gender in search of a comfortable life. Although the protagonist, Jasmine is not

engulfed in the web of the past life but she is still nostalgic of her native land. She tries to totally cut off from her past life, but it remains embedded somewhere in her.

“In Hasnapur may be old at twenty-two I think of Vimla, a gold I envied because she lived in a two storied brick house with real windows. Our hut was mud. Her marriage was the fanciest the village had ever seen. Her father gave away a zipsy red Maruti and a refrigerator in the dowry. *Jasmine* 15)”

Jasmine wants to assimilate and adapt the new host culture and she even changes her identity evolved by her past. Her past is always promoting her while taking a new personality. She always unmask her ethnic life, while forming a new identity. Jasmine tries to give her old memories in order to become a part of America, but she fails to leave her bygone memories completely. She is attached to her old customs and values either consciously or unconsciously. There is no escape from the past life. Her new world, new identity is some or the other way attached to the old loops of past life.

In the novel *Jasmine*, Jasmine experiences this loss in the form of identity crises as well as cultural transformation Mukherjee's journey of displacement began in 1947, when she was hardly eight years old and she left India along with her family, for London. She spent three years and learned English in a private school of London. She says "It was the time of forgetting Bengali and acquiring English until I reached an absolute equilibrium". (Blaise and Mukherjee, *Days and Nights*, 182). Mukherjee through her immigrant figures narrated the tale of her life, from an expatriate to an immigrant, her immigrant characters demonstrate a strange fusion of American and Indian cultures as well as depict the conflict between the east and the west. After becoming an immigrant, they neither remain an Indian nor an American, they are nowhere and possess no identity of their own.

Mukherjee's novel *The Tigers Daughters* is a narration of Mukherjee's own experience when she returned to India with her Canadian husband Clark Blaise in 1973. It deals with the problems of immigrants and presents cultural conflict and traumas of expatriation and isolation. The protagonist Tara marries David Cartwright, an American and returns to India after seven years. When she reaches India, she finds India very different from what she imagined and expected. Tara's self-analysis about India leads her to disappointment. The novel demonstrates Tara's uprootedness in her own land. She returns to Calcutta to locate her home, cultural roots and inherit her identity as the great granddaughter of Hari Lal Banerjee of Panchapara, but straddles between the two cultures of India and America. In *The Tigers Daughter* Mukherjee has presented a dual life of her women immigrant Tara, who is caught between two ways of life, two worlds, two ideologies as well as two different ways to encounter realities. Tara feels insecure

when her friends and relatives tries to own her with her acquired foreignness and treats her like a foreigner. Her relatives welcome her as 'Americawali' and her husband a 'meleccha' which means an outcast. Tara is deeply hurt and alienated by this alien treatment of her dear ones. She visits to her memorable places like St Blake and Nayapur but all brought her disappointment and resolves to leave Calcutta for good.

Mukherjee's novel, *Wife* deals with the complexity of immigrant life, their strength and courage to survive and live between the acquired land and their land of origin. According to C.L Chua,

Wife is the story of a weak-minded Bengali woman who migrates to New York with her engineer husband in search of a better life; but her sensibilities become so confused and confounded by their change in cultural roles, the dangerous television artificiality and the tensions of a women viz -a viz her family and husband which ironically makes her mad, so she goes mad and kills her husband (54-5).

Wife encompasses social conflict, East -West encounter and the status of the woman immigrant experience. Dimple the protagonist marries a young engineer Amit Basu, who applies for immigration to the United States, Canada and Kenya. Dimple restrains in the joint family of her in-laws as there is a lack of freedom, basic amenities and ever-growing demand of the family has driven her crazy. She becomes excited when she comes to know that her husband is planning to go to America. She feels it will pave her way to freedom and liberty from ethnicity and tradition. Dimple even indulges in self-abortion by skipping ropes as she feels it may hinder in her migration to America. To Maya Manju Sharma, Dimple's act of abortion "is a sacrament of liberation from the traditional role and the constraints of womanhood". (Maya Manju Sharma 15). Amit begins his long search for a job, while Dimple spends her time in the company of Meena Sen and another Bengali expatriate in New York. The frequent announcement of murder in the newspaper brings a restlessness and frustration in her. She envies Ina Mullick whom she met at a party, but slowly she gets influenced by her and starts liking her words and way of life. Ina leads Dimple to fall in love with Mitt Glessner, an American. Dimple is grabbed by loneliness, cut off and distraught when she could not meet Mitt Glessner frequently. Her miseries increase as she suffers insomnia, and feels very lonely in her Manhattan apartment. She passes her time watching American violence on television and entertains a fear of violence in her real life. She is haunted by dreams and illusions during the day and in a fit of utter disturbance and insanity, she murders her husband with a kitchen knife. The novel, leads to rootlessness and downfall of Dimple due to her lack of acculturation.

Leave it To Me, another novel of Mukherjee, exhibits the life and struggle of an orphan Debby Di Martino. Debi is adopted by very kind parents who loved her very much. In spite of their generous love and care Devi sets out in search of her biological parents. The novel also casts the conflicts between the Eastern and the Western worlds and mother and daughter relationship. *Jasmine*, another novel of Mukherjee reveals a positive approach of the immigrant towards the harsh circumstances faced by them during the immigration process. The novel poses cultural loss and identity quest in the United Nation. Mukherjee has posed different phases of cross-cultural reality by presenting the odyssey of the immigrants from Punjab to California, Florida, New York and Iowa. The protagonist Jyoti, struggles hard to cope up with her rootlessness. Transformation plays an eminent role in the life of Jyoti, she goes on changing her names as well as destination. She transforms from Jyoti, Jasmine, Jazzy, Jase, Jane via divergent geographical locales like Punjab, New York, Iowa and finally California. Her life shuttles between India, America, between her past and present. Jasmine marries Prakash, who gives her a new name Jasmine. Prakash receives a letter from professor Vadhera encouraging him to study in America. While they plan to move to Florida, Prakash is killed in a bomb attack. Jasmine continues her attempt to move to Florida and she travels by plane, train and ship. During her journey she faces a lot of difficulties, she is even sexually abused and as a result, she scrutinizes killing herself but kills the culprit Half Face. After taking revenge she burns her husband's suitcase together with her clothes stained with the dead man's blood. According to Mukherjee, burning of clothes is a symbol that Jasmine trashes the old tradition as well as her traditional identity. The novel is an epitome of the immigrant feeling of desperation, hopelessness, sense of loss and disorientation. Dimple expresses,

"We are the outcasts and deportees, strange pilgrims visiting outlandish shrines, landing at the end of tarmacs, ferried in old army trucks where we are roughly handled and taken to roped-off corners of waiting rooms where surely,to be allowed to land; to pass Through; to continue (Mukherjee, Bharati *Jasmine*101)

Jasmine meets Mrs Gordon, who calls her Jazzy and helps her to go to New York to meet professor Vadhera. Jasmine lives with professor Vadhera for five months and professor agrees to

get her a green card for fifty thousand rupees. Jasmine then moves to Iowa and works for Wylie. Jasmine tries to balance her life through her continues movement and transformation. The self-transformation satisfies her inner self rather than the society. Her inner consciousness makes her act according to her own will. Jasmine attains the state of inner fulfillment, through series of transformation in an alien land. Bharati Mukherjee's immigrants are keen travelers who move throughout the continents, the past and the present, the new and the old and East and the West.

Mukherjee poses United States as the land of opportunities for immigrants. Her novels *The Tree Bride* and *Desirable Daughters* discuss the concept of returning back to one's roots and retrieval of their past. The protagonist of *Desirable Daughters*, Tara is born in India, she is the youngest of the three sisters. The sisters settle down in different corners of the globe. Tara leaves India after her marriage to Bish. Rabi is the only son of Bish and Tara. Tara gets divorced with Bish and lives with Rabi in San Francisco. Tara spent her childhood in India following the Indian culture and tradition. After Tara's settlement in America, she has a huge impact of the American lifestyle, she surpasses her Indian traditions of upbringing. In America she tries to adapt completely to the American way of life. She calls her husband by his name, and she divorces him without any concrete or justified reason which signifies her antiIndianism. After her divorce, she starts living with her boyfriend Andy, a Hungarian.

Tara acquires the lifestyle of the foreign land, she admits, "It is one of those San Francisco things I can't begin to explain in India, just like I can't explain my Indian life to the woman I know in California". (Mukherjee, Bharati *Desirable Daughters* 26) Tara has been pictured as a new world women caught in between her modern America and old traditions of India. Despite her American openness, life and thinking, she is unable to isolate herself completely from her Indian roots. Rabi becomes the medium of contact between Tara and Bish even after their divorce. At last Tara reconciles with her husband. After arriving Bombay Tara relates herself with her ancestor the Tree bride. Tara's journey to India turns out to be a quest for her roots, a search for her ancestral past. She adapts the American lifestyle, but could not cut herself completely from her ancestral roots. During her stay in India, she lives with her parents in Rishikesh and discovers her lost Indianness. Her faith in Indian culture revives once again in Rishikesh. Rabi is also inspired by the philosophy of Vivekanand, he gets attracted by the Indian way of life and its united way of living in joint families. Tara finally visits her ancestral historic house of Tree bride with her son. The novel ends with Tara's reconciliation with her Indianness and Indian traditions.

Conclusion

Mukherjee's characters eminently display the cultural conflict between the past and the present. The immigrants who voluntarily or involuntarily become a part of a new nation for better future, hardly some of them are able to make it their native land. They always want to return to the past

land and the new land turn into a locus of longing and leads to a feeling of nostalgia and loneliness and insecurity. The past life is always present in the present and they continuously go on reconstructing it through their memories. There is always a lacuna in the present new home which leads to a shift or search towards the past life. They are unable to adjust to their new life as a result they feel rejected and neglected and try to comfort themselves by the past memories or the nostalgic impulses. Thus, there is no end to the connection between the past and the present. The immigrants are connected to both the poles in order to balance their old life and the new one.

As a result, Mukherjee's protagonists are inevitable victims of psychological insecurity of immigrant life. Her immigrants are basically women, who migrated from distant lands to settle down in America. Her novels are a narration of the painful loss of a native place, tradition and culture of the immigrants. It represents the effective concepts of home, belonging and difficulty in multicultural western society. The immigrant remains permanently in between the old and the new social and cultural group. They are neither able to reject or uncritically accept either of the cultures. The immigrant focuses on the complexity of cultural dislocation and loss of identity. The novels also give a picture of America as a nation which welcomes and fulfill the dreams of immigrants by providing ample opportunities.

Mukherjee's immigrant, face all hardship and demonstrate their possibility by overcoming sundry hurdles, life possesses in their way. Her mongrel characters at time, boldly rejects tradition and chooses uncritical adoption of western culture and ways of life. They even try to balance between tradition and modernity by becoming contented with their American life, but eventually cannot snap their past completely. They consider their past as a moral strength and a source of solace amidst their modern life. Thus, Mukherjee's migrant characters depict a sense of positive attitude in an apparent difficult environmental condition. They try to succeeds in the journey of immigration by overcoming the hurdles they come across.

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