

The Personal Identity Of Indian Migrant Women In The Select Novels Of Bharati Mukherjee

Author:

K. Prabakar

Ph.D. Research Scholar

PG and Research Department of English

Jamal Mohamed College (A)

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

Tiruchirappalli-620020.

Co-author:

Dr. M. Shajahan Sait

Associate professor

PG and Research Department of English

Jamal Mohamed College (A)

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University

Tiruchirappalli-620020.

Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born American novelist, is a feminine singer in Indian Diaspora. Her novel extracts the cross-cultural everyday experiences faced by her different women with various images in her novels. Her central characters struggle to adjust and assimilate two different cultures, customary traditions, civilization, etc. The quest for rootlessness and search for self-identity are the major themes of her novels. Another interesting aspect of Indian English fiction is many Indian women writers like Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Shoba De, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Bharati Mukherjee have made it possible to speak of women in Indian English fiction. This paper intrinsically and elaborately portrays the personal identity of Indian migrant women and the problems they face in their motherland as well as in abroad.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Diaspora, Image, Struggle

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, to an upper-middle-class Brahmin family in Calcutta. Mukherjee and her two sisters were given excellent schooling. In 1947 her father was given a job in England and he brought his family to live there until 1951, which allowed Mukherjee to develop and perfect her English language skills.

Mukherjee earned B.A with honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959, and a master's degree in England and Ancient Indian culture, which she acquired in 1961 from Baroda University. Having planned to be a writer since childhood, Mukherjee went to the University of Iowa in 1961 to attend the prestigious writer's workshop. She planned to study there to earn her Master of Fine Arts, then return to India to marry a bridegroom of her father's choosing. But suddenly she married Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer after two weeks of courtship. She received her M.F.A., that same year, and then went on to earn her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Iowa in 1969.

In 1968, Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with her husband and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. Her fourteen years in Canada were some of the hardest periods of her life, as she saw racial discrimination practiced at many levels in Canada and also experienced it personally. The appearance of the South Asian immigrants in Canadian Society evoked a lot of hostility. She has spoken in many interviews about her difficult life in Canada. Although, those years were challenging Mukherjee was able to write her first two novels, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975) while working

as a professor at McGill University in Montreal. During those years she also collected many of the sentiments found in her first collection of short stories *Darkness* (1985), which reflects her mood of cultural separation while living in Canada.

Fed up with Canada, Mukherjee and her family moved to the United States in 1980 and she became a permanent U.S resident. Continuing to write, in 1986 she was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant. After holding several posts at various colleges and Universities, she ultimately settled in 1989 at the University of California, Berkeley.

A Brief note on Mukherjee's select novels:

Mukherjee's first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), is a fictionalized story, based on Mukherjee's first years of marriage and her return home for a visit. This novel describes Mukherjee's difficulties of being caught between two worlds, and is an examination of who she is and where she belongs to. It explores the cross-cultural experiences of the protagonist Tara Banerjee's family.

She goes to study in America at the age of fifteen. Her room-mates refuse to share food with her. When she marries an American, her husband David Cartwright, cannot understand the traditional values of her family and there are some issues in communication between them. After seven years of marriage, she decides to visit her motherland but does not find the expected comfort even there. She finds it dirty and depressing. She feels torn between New York and Calcutta, between David and her own family. Sunita B.Nimavat writes, "Assimilation is not easy for the first generation of the expatriates. Internal changes do not take place easily and quickly. She has married an

American. She lives in the USA but she still feels homesick for India but once she is in India, she does not like its dirty streets and shabby atmosphere. In New York, she feels dazed and unsafe. (P.29)

Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife* (1975), tells the story of Dimple Dasgupta who immigrates to America with her husband Amit Basu and faces cultural shock and racism in an alien land. She aspires for some freedom and space to grow after her marriage. But her husband Amit, wants her to follow traditional Indian values even in America. Moreover, she feels alienated in a strange land. Thus she is doubly estranged and marginalized. Thus both the novels bring out the cross-cultural journeys of the protagonists and their quest for identity. They portray cultural conflict, racial and gender discrimination.

The entire cycle of expatriation is presented in *Wife* that involves alienation, immigration, adaption, racial issues, colour prejudices. The initial stage of both *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* are India and the USA, homeland and alien country. In the novel *Wife*, the Americanization of Dimple is almost complete. The action involves both physical as well as psychological aspects.

Jasmine (1989), Mukherjee's most popularly read novel, was received enthusiastically. The novel has its origin in a short story in the *Middleman and Other Stories* and was expanded to a story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and re-roots herself in search of a new life in America. It is a story of dislocation and relocation as the title character continually moves into other roles, moving further

westward while constantly feeling her past. Mukherjee favours the idea of assimilation and makes it clear that jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant of her life because in the third world she faced only despair and loss.

The holder of the world (1993) plays with time and culture from an opposite perspective. Here a young American woman becomes enmeshed in the life of a 17th - century relative. She travels to India to track her ancestor, a puritan American woman who ended up as the mistress of an Indian king.

Leave it to me (1997) the novel follows the journey of a young American Sociopath who has rejected her adoptive parents and is seeking her roots with a vengeance. Mukherjee weaves together Hindu and Greek mythology to explore her character's complex drive to find who she is or, rather become someone else.

Desirable Daughters (2002) the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming and never truly absolute. Tara is a Savvy, Cosmopolitan world- traveler having beauty, brain, wealth and privileged life as the wife of a Silicon Valley magnate. She emigrates after marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee, and arrives in America, steeped in Indian Culture and exhibiting the behavior of a typical Indian wife. Thus when Tara reaches America she feels the conflict between convention and autonomy. She immediately tries to embrace American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can do the new society. But she is constantly aware of being different.

This article has tried to focus on the themes of cross cultural confrontation in the selected novels of Bharati Mukherjee. Her fictional characters are portrayed as the themes of a delineating situation in their life. Again Mukherjee has reflected the life and present situation of their women images and protagonist in her fiction. It further describes how the women images suffered both physically and emotionally in the orthodox family life and expatriate life. In all her women images presented in her fiction is not much different but some of them have different cultural and social pattern.

Mukherjee's novels explore the symbolic significance of these characters representing Indian migrants to the U.S. These novels discuss the depiction of the development of the personal identity of Indian migrant women in the U.S. and their confusion and dilemma of adjusting between two different cultures. Her protagonists are well aware of the brutality and antagonism that surround them and are often made victims by various forms of social restraint. Her protagonists are the spokesperson of her own experiences.

Conclusion:

Bharati Mukherjee explores cross-cultural confrontations in her novels. But she does not try to glorify any specific culture or hold one over the other, demonstrating that each culture has both positive and negative aspects and that no culture is perfect in itself. Her approach is a very balanced one and she critiques both Indian and Western cultures. She criticizes child marriages, ill treatment of women, Sati, etc. On the other hand, western culture is liberal.

In all her novels Bharati Mukherjee describes the experience of women immigrants in American society and she focuses on the strategies of survival that these women adopt as they relocate to new and alien worlds.

Works Cited:

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine*, Virago Press, London, 1991.

------. *Leave it to Me*, Fawcett Columbine, The Ballantine Publishing Group, New York, 1997

------. *The Holder of the World*, Columbine, The Ballantine Publishing Group, New York. 1993.

------. *Desirable Daughters*, Rupa Publications India Pvt.Ltd, New Delhi, 2012.

------. *Wife*, Houghton Mifflin, United States, 1975.

------. *The Tiger's Daughter*, Houghton Mifflin, United States, 1971.

Nimavat, B. Sunita. *Bharati Mukherjee Jasmine a critical analysis*, Prakash Book Depot, Bareilly. 2013, P, 29.

.