

## **Migration is Incarnation-Immigrant Experiences in Bharati Mukherjee's novels**

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**Abstract:** *Immigrant experiences are a composite one made up of journeys and border crossings. Migration leads to separation. Separation means of rebirth in a country marked by new culture and new adjustments in an alien land. Immigrant psyche shows the interaction of traditional culture within the culture of an adopted alien land and bring about a transformation in the inherited tradition and culture of the immigrant. Almost all her novels depict an immigrant looking back to her mother country with pain and nostalgia but an immigrant who shares the common grievances of those who are impelled by an insistent urge to give voice to the aspirations of these new settlers. In the novels *The Tiger's Daughters*, *Desirable Daughters*, *Wife*, *Jasmine* *The Holder of the World* we confront characters that despite suffering they are not ready look back. Their sensibility gets altered under the stress of circumstances at the same time they are changing the situation around them by fighting.*

**Key words:** *change, culture, immigrant, journey, voice,*

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### **I. Introduction**

Immigrant experiences are a composite one made up of journeys and border crossings. Migration leads to separation. Separation means of rebirth in a country marked by new culture and new adjustments in an alien land. Immigrant psyche shows the interaction of traditional culture within the culture of an adopted alien land and bring about a transformation in the inherited tradition and culture of the immigrant. Almost all her novels depict an immigrant looking back to her mother country with pain and nostalgia but an immigrant who shares the common grievances of those who are impelled by an insistent urge to give voice to the aspirations of these new settlers. In the novels *The Tiger's Daughters*, *Desirable Daughters*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* we confront characters that despite suffering they are not ready look back. Their sensibility gets altered under the stress of circumstances at the same time they are changing the situation around them by fighting: To comment upon A.Sivanandan in his *Alien Gods* :

“ On the margin of European culture, and alienated from his own, the ‘coloured’ [...person] is an artifact of colonial history, marginal man par excellence. He is a creature of two worlds, and of none. Thrown by a specific history, he remains stranded on its shores even as it recedes; and what he comes into is not so much a twilight world, as a world of false shadows and false light.” (104-18)

It is in this space of confrontation of differently slanting societal accents and of diverse socio-linguistic perceptions that the novel of diasporic awareness is born. It has its being in a co-existence of plurality of voices which do not combine into a single consciousness but exist on different layers generating dialogic dynamism. The diasporic texts start from a position of arrival, provisional and deferred, with hybridity as an agency interrupting the relation between power and knowledge by bringing into question the problem of representation of otherness as a contestable site of struggle. It is a hazard to dominant culture that seeks to ethicize difference and render it exotic or static, rather than seeing it as a condition of culture as a whole.

Migrations have both erased and re-inscribed patterns of being and belonging, producing a self with multiple and partial identification which is simultaneously both individualized and community oriented. Thus the diasporic writer occupies a space of exile and cultural seclusion which can be called a hybrid location of aggression, uninterrupted tension and expectant confusion. In fact writing allows individuals to recuperate control over the self, the world and their own life story narrative. It provides a unique safe space in which new identities can be created and linguistic transitions accomplished.

This metastasis is also seen in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, who is one of the most celebrated writers of the Asian immigrant experience in America. Her writings are mostly honed by manifold dislocations of her personal biography, which itself has been described as a text in a kind of permanent immigration. Lying at the heart of Mukherjee's cultural poetics is her support of the immigrant aesthetics, essential to which is a rejection of fixed conceptions of national cultural identity.

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. This is an interesting study of an upper class Bengali Brahmin girl who goes to America for higher studies.

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Though afraid of the unknown ways of America in the beginning she tries to regulate herself to it by entering into the wedlock with an American. She returns to India after seven years, only to find herself a total stranger in the inherited environment. She realises that she is now neither Indian nor truly American. She is totally confused and lost in the world.

On landing at Bombay airport, she is greeted lovingly by her relatives but her response is very cold and composed. When her relatives address her as Tultul a nick name which they always uses for her, it sounds odd to her Americanized ears. Seven years ago while on her way to Vassar 'She has admired the house of marine Drive, had thought them fashionable, but now their shabbiness appalled her' (18). Coming to back to India, America looks like dream land to her. Just a few days passed since she left America but it seems to her that she had never been out of India, her old sense of pride comes back to her. "She had not thought that seven years in another country, a husband, a new blue passport could be easily blotted out"(25). Though she was surrounded by relatives, and by vendors ringing bells, beggars begging everything look unreal. For a moment she thinks that she is going to be mad. Even her father becomes "a symbol for the outside world. He had become a pillar supporting a balcony that had long outlived it's a beauty and its function"(29).

Her America far from being a land of promise is a land of violence and atrocity. It's a land of strangers and all her attempts at integration are intended to collapse due to her otherness. She breaks her family convention and marries American David. Since she is not able to cope with David and his society, her marriage proves to be a failure because it is an emotional marriage and also an endeavor to get protection in an alien land. In an attempt to Americanize herself she loses her Indian identity. Thus she starts a life of duality and conflict since her childhood. After marriage she undergoes upsetting predicament enjoined upon her to belong to an entirely new set up. Thus Tara Banerjee confronts confusion when she visits India after a gap of seven years. This is because of her strong cultural heritage in India. In the deepest core of her heart, she is an ordinary Indian but her re-routed self in America has made such cross cultural confrontation alien to her. With this thought deeply entrenched in her heart her aspiration is to keep herself from India and go back to the safety of American heritage.

Bharati Mukherjee's Second novel *Wife* is the psychological study of Dimple Dasgupta, a middle class Bengali wife who accompanies husband to New York from Calcutta. Rose to be submissive and reliant according to traditional Indian standards of femininity she lacks the requisite inner resources to cope with the sense of panic and estrangement in New York. Mukherjee reverts the setting and action in this novel. In the earlier novel we come across a heroin that does everything to recuperate her Indian roots but here we have a heroine who does everything to eliminate her roots. She induces a miscarriage by skipping ropes just before emigrating to the states simply because she does not want to carry any remnants from her old world. Her misguide Americanism begins when she raises the question of individual happiness as a western ideal she has failed to make certain up to or a right she has been denied. Her dilemma is that whether she wants to become fully American or not, but at the same time find the life sickening there. The harsh reality of violence torn American society shatters her daydream world and so do her nerves. First she contemplates the romantic ways to get liberate of her meaningless survival but last kills Amit her husband as the eventual act of self-assertion. Thus in this novel also Mukherjee highlights the psychic-socio problems that an expatriate faces.

The story of Jasmine, protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee's novel of the same name begins as Jyoti, in a small village of Hasnapur in Punjab. She is renamed Jasmine after her marriage to Prakash. Prakash wishes her to become a modern city woman and as he aids her in her conversion from ' Jyoti ' to ' Jasmine ' she both perceives herself as, and eventually becomes the figure that Prakash desires to create. Here Mukherjee is depicting identity formation as a multifaceted process that is dependent not solely upon the agency of the individual, but also upon the surrounding milieu. Her renaming is a sign of her initial migration away from traditional India. Jyoti and Jasmine are two separate selves, yet Jasmine finds herself occupying both identities. Suddenly Prakash is murdered and Jasmine immigrates to America all alone to accomplish his dreams. Upon her arrival in Florida, she meets Half-Face, the captain of the ship on which she entered the country, and his discourteous treatment gives her, her first taste of American ethnic categorization. Half-Face sees her only as a sexual being and after the rape Jasmine finds that she cannot run away from this new perception of her identity. Thus she turns to aggression in order to express the conflict she is experiencing. She stabs Half-Face to death and in this act she finds the strength to continue living and vows to initiate a new life in America, separate from India and the immature identity of her past. Hence Jasmine's identity is formed not through construction alone, but also by the devastation of her existing self. Jasmine soon finds herself muffled by the sluggishness of this home for it was entirely inaccessible from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her succession towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and stop thinking about her past completely.

She proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New York City. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet a new identity upon a new awareness of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They come into view in specific moments in the text and intensify the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. While living with the Hayes, Jasmine begins to master the English language, empowering herself to further suitable American culture. This act of Jasmine confirms her Americanization. She asserts: I am not choosing between the promise of America and old world dutifulness (240).

Taylor begins to call her 'Jase' symptomatic of that again she does not have an agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. Also, for the first time in the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understood that she was from South Asia and tried to correlate her with that community. Taylor's friends essentialize Jasmine, falling as victim to the Orientalist habit of presumptuous knowledge of the other and expecting an essence from her because of her background. Thus she is discriminated against but on a much subtler level, as her ethnic identity is now subject to the discrimination of incorrect distinction.

Before long Taylor gets passionately involved with Jasmine and embraces her different ethnicity without orientaling her into an alien fantasy. Jasmine transforms, but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own longing for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets gradually more comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to suppress earlier, more so, after her upsetting experience. But the relationship between Taylor and Jasmine ends unexpectedly when the past creeps upon her once again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband. The inevitability of memory, and the boundless nature of time and space is strained once again and Jasmine finds her life unclear by the different consciousness through which she now experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self expression. Unable to live with this embarrassment of contradictory identities she flees to Baden County, Iowa to give her life with a fresh start.

The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless convinced in her decision to depart. This sense of movement further reinforces the concept that her identity is forever embryonic, she cannot remain in a constant life because tumult and change are the means of her continued existence. The adjacent environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates between chronological and spatial locations, her observation of herself changes, thereby ensuing in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a strain within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely.

The Holder of the World Mukherjee's fifth novel is again endless saga of an immigrant. Here we find a seventeenth century puritan American woman Hannah Easton who makes a journey of India and is completely distorted by the emotional love of the east. She finds true happiness only in the company of a HindhuRaja, Jadav Singh snapping all her ties with her English husband Gabriel Legge. Like Jasmine she also finds contentment and joy in the adopted land and it is morality of this land, which she carries along with her when she returns.

In Mukherjee's latest novel *Desirable Daughters*, the creation of identity emerges as incessant process, forever transforming and never truly absolute. Tara is a savvy, cosmopolitan world-traveler having beauty, brain, wealth and a privileged life as the wife of a Silicon Valley magnate. She emigrates after marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee, and arrives in America steeped in Indian culture exhibiting the behaviour of the paradigmatic Indian wife. Back at home, she had led a sheltered life where she was swamped with culture, tradition and values though inculcated with education by the Catholic nuns. Thus when Tara reaches America she feels the haul between convention and autonomy as she tries to meet expectations that are often passionately incongruous. But then she immediately tries to embrace American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can to the new society. Yet how much ever she ventures to mix together in with the cosmopolitan population of San Francisco she is constantly aware of being different. She finds it impossible to convey to her American friends regarding the citizens of comparatively classless, mobile society how constrained and static Indian identity is.

## **II. Conclusion**

The characters in Mukherjee's novel develop manifold consciousness, resulting in a neither self that is neither amalgamated nor cross, but rather fragmented. As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the text, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is an erroneous belief and the reality of the diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of

multiplicity. This multiplicity at times becomes a noteworthy plight for the characters, for as their different consciousnesses contradict each other, the characters are left doubtful as to the nature of their identities, not knowing where they fit in the American society. Finally they become competent of living in a world where individuals exist not as an integrated one, but as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities. Thus their sensibility gets altered under the stress of circumstances at the same time they are changing the situation around the by putting up a brave fight.

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