

Transformation of Female Immigrant Identity in the Select Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

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Abstract:-

Mukherjee lays claim to an America that is both constantly transforming, and transformed by, the new immigrant. However, it is clear that Mukherjee's representation of a fluid American (trans)national identity influenced by diversity is ultimately predicated on the foregrounding of differences. Despite Mukherjee's call for America to go beyond multiculturalism in its treatment of new immigrants, her own postcolonial immigrant subjectivity-inevitably shaped by her elite British and American educational background-remains aligned with white hegemony, which continues to hierarchize its immigrants on the bases of ethnicity, class and gender. So this paper attempts to show the sense of assimilation and assertion of female protagonist Tara in Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), the main causes of the suffering of her women characters are therefore the hostile situations and the unfavourable social conditions which obstruct the path of their lives for a meaningful existence. Feelings of loneliness and homelessness contribute to their existential predicament where as Bharati Mukherjee's women experience these feelings abroad. Being an expatriate herself, Mukherjee often deals with the plight and conditions of the immigrants and expatriates. In her novels the problems of displacement and cultural crises are the main causes of the suffering of women. This article intends to study the problems of existentialism and its subsequent effects on the women protagonists in the selected novels of both the writers.

Keywords; Migration, Displacement, Assertion, Assimilation, Identity crisis, Predicament

Introduction

Bharati Mukherjee, an India born Canadian/American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. She is an investigative pioneer--of innovative terrains, practices, and literatures-co-existent with her wide-ranging mission to discover new worlds. Her novels, honestly, depict the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement (alienation) from her land of origin to Canada where she was simultaneously invisible as a writer and over exposed as a racial minority and her final re-location (assimilation) to USA as a naturalized citizen. Acculturation is the depressing upshot of post-modern scenario, which Mukherjee had comprehended much early in her life. That is why, as a postmodern writer, her foremost concern has been the life of South-Asian expatriates and the dilemma of Assertion and Assimilation.

Mark Shackleton has stated that in his book *Diasporic Literature and Theory --Where Now?* The theoretical innovations of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford and others have in recent years vitalized postcolonial and diaspora studies, challenging ways in which we understand 'culture' and developing new ways of thinking beyond the confines of the nation state. The notion of diaspora in particular has been productive in its attention to the real-life movement of peoples throughout the world, whether these migrations have been through choice or compulsion. But perhaps of even greater significance to postcolonial theory has been the consideration of the epistemological implications of the term – diaspora as theory.

Diasporic writings also known as 'expatriate writings' give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rack owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves sandwiched between two cultures. The feelings of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, consciously or unconsciously. They all voice the anguish of the people, living for away from their native land and being discriminated on the grounds of race, colour or creed.

Through her female characters who are autobiographical projections of her experience as an expatriate she represents in her novels the contemporary woman's struggle to define herself and attain an autonomous selfhood, especially in cross-cultural crisis, a subject which has assumed a great significance in the present world of globalization. She endeavors to dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrant women who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values; inherent in their personality and their fascination for western mode of living.

In Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, the story about Tara, a convent educated Calcutta Brahmin girl, who goes to America for higher education, and is married to an American, David Cartwright. She returns to Calcutta after seven years of stay in America. This is similar to Mukherjee's own trip back to India with her Canadian husband, Clark Blaise. Tara feels more alienated on her return, as she encounters the clash of cultures and values in Calcutta. Hence, the westernized Tara feels like an alien in her own country. Therefore in the end, she decides to return to her husband David in America.

Aparajita Ray rightly comments:

"The protagonist Tara Banerjee Cartwright makes a trip home to India to soothe her ruffled feathers but becomes painfully aware that her memories of a genteel Brahmin lifestyle are usurped by her westernization" (84).

Instead of being comforted by middle-class Bengali Brahmin traditions, Tara is now struck by great impressions of poverty, hunger, disease, and political turmoil. Tara's father sends Tara to New York for higher studies at the age of fifteen. Though she confronts discrimination in the foreign land, she faces it boldly and even reacts aggressively to defend her family and her native country when her friends try to ridicule it. Whenever she feels broken, she prays to goddess Kali for strength. She hangs silk scarves around her apartment to make it more Indian at times of her loneliness.

She thinks on her own and gives importance to her desires. When she comes across cultural conflicts in America, she tries to resolve it by herself. In the meantime, she meets David Cartwright an American, falls in love with him and takes a bold decision to marry him overlooking her family customs and traditions. Tara who had defended her Indian heritage breaks it with courage by marrying an American who is considered an outcaste by her family. She believes that her marriage with an American will give her new meaning to her American life. Tara's American attitude to life is easily sensed by her relatives in India. The dullness, emptiness and desperation are evoked by her American life:

New York, she thought now, had been exotic. . . . there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels. Because girls like her...were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings.... The only pollution she had been warned against in Calcutta had been caste pollution.

New York was certainly extraordinary and it had driven her to despair. (33-34)

Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. The multiculturalism ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life and a near break with the past. They are shown at an emotional transit point and from their dual and bicultural perception they attempt to measure the disjuncture and persecutory paranoia.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) depicts the atrocities inflicted on the 'gendered subaltern', that is, women in the forms of child marriage, imposed arranged marriage, and limited prospects of career for talented girls like Padma, Parvathi and Tara in the novel. Mukherjee seems to generalize the pitiable plight of women when she comments: "A Bengali Girl's happiest night is about to become her lifetime imprisonment. It seems all the sorrows of history, all that is unjust in society and cruel in religion has settled on her" (Mukherjee, 2002: 4). The main characters in the novel grapple with the challenge of accommodating the American feminist culture into their traditional Indian one. But, as schools of thoughts go, these two concepts are incompatible. The conventional role assigned to women in India is the very antithesis of what American feminists espouse. She gives space to immigrant consciousness with focus on divulgence of female protagonists that provides a new pattern to her fiction as Victoria Carchidi says about this particular aspect of her stories "when multiple worlds meet, the result can be a glorious freeing leaves of the kaleidoscope, that complexly intermix and produce new pattern" (Carchidi: 98). While discussing

the immigrant consciousness Mukherjee to a great extent relies on compromises and assimilation on the part of immigrants and Susan Koshy foregrounds, “Mukherjee’s celebration of assimilation is an insufficient confrontation of the historical circumstances of ethnicity and race in the United States and of the complexities of diasporic subject-formation” (Koshy: 69). However, her fictional world is not a simple tale of immigrant’s assimilation American cultural values and unproblematic promotion of American multiculturalism rather along with these elements she confronts the historical conditions of ethnicity and race in the United States and foregrounds the complexities of diasporic subject-formation and simultaneously through the inversion of colonizer-colonized dichotomy she fabulizes America, Hinduizes assimilation, and represents the real pleasures and violence of cultural exchange. According to David Mura her fictional world or rather project based of factionalizing reality involves “a discovery and a creation, as well as a retrieval, of a new set of myths, heroes, and gods, and a history that has been occluded or ignored” (Mura: 204).

The writer as well as her fictional characters give up the India that they were born into, and (re)create to anchor their own New World. The author’s personal experiences and requirements in a new environ compel her to “invent a more exciting- perhaps a more psychologically accurate-a more precisely metaphoric more Indias” (Mukherjee and Blaise: 297). While inventing a new India she also requires to invent a more precisely metaphoric America while doing so, in her own words, she makes use of “Hindu imagination; everything is a causeless, endless middle” (Mukherjee and Blaise: 175). Therefore, the Hindu vision of the world, which in turn is actually created by the European orientalisks and which is imbibed by Hindus as their inherent nature and projected as Indianness becomes “a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world” (Mukherjee, 1985: xv).

This struggle between two newly invented metaphors and the two realities is evident from the character of Tara who faces the enigma of modern women after her settlement in America. She undergoes transformation from a desirable daughter to an advanced American lady. Like the New Woman she is caught in the struggle between tradition and modernity. As a protean heroine she braves the New World to seek her individual identity. She makes adventure in dress, food and fashion. She began to address her husband as Bishu, while in India; she could not utter his name.

This is the story of an extremely traditional girl’s transformation. The traditional aspect of her upbringing is evident from the fact that Tara Lata was first married to a tree in a ceremonious ritual, as a measure to mitigate the malefic aspects of her horoscope. It was earlier predicted by a Hindu astrologer that Tara’s married life would be short lived as a result of this malefic aspect. Such conceptions of marriage are mere superstitions from the point of view of feminism. The American feminist movement, which was informed by scientific, sociological and historical knowledge would never approve of such primitive practices in the name of orthodoxy. This is a typical example of the sorts of conflict that Tara Lata and her sisters confront throughout the narrative text.

Her personality undergoes a drastic change under the influence of American culture and the faithful Indian wife takes on licentious life as evident from her sexual relationship with Andy. She divorces her husband because the promise of life as an American wife was not being fulfilled while she knew that divorce was a stigma for woman in Indian society. She wanted to drive and to work, to be economically independent. Husband in Indian conservative society is treated as god, “sheltering tree”, provider and protector, but Tara breaks this myth and chooses another man who suits her temperament and who satisfies her sexual desires. Therefore, she aspires to be loved and respected and does not want to be provided and protected by her husband as is desired in the case of other women. She differs from other women. She is the protagonist of the novel because she has the indomitable courage to transcend the boundaries, to take initiation on an unknown path which may lead her to ruin.

While her sisters Padma and Parvati lead a complacent and passive life, adopt a middle path, remain suspicious about their new identity, do not feel the need to widen their horizons and are less assertive, Tara emerges as a powerful figure to meet every adverse situation; to march ahead with all her limitations to an unknown and unfathomed path of realizing her full potential as an independent human being. Padma lives in America, but she clings to Indian ways, friends, clothes and food. Padma calls Tara:

American meaning self-engrossed. She reminds Tara to follow the models of Sita and Savitri, things are never perfecting marriage; a woman must be prepared to accept less than perfection in this

lifetime-and to model herself on Sita, Savitri and Behula, the virtuous wives of Hindu myths.
 (Mukherjee, 2002: 134)

Conclusion

Mukherjee, female characters are faced many problems in this postmodern world. Here this paper has examined Indian migrated women are search for their identity in the multicultural land of America is excellently revealed through the spaces of tradition, personal memories, different places and new ways of life style in the altered socio-cultural constraints. They tried to reconstruct their own identity against the traditions to which they belong. While doing so, they also maintain their Indian identity of which they feel proud. Hence the efforts of maintaining both identities – partly Indian, partly American – make them the hybrid of new culture that again poses the question of their real identity.

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