

SCRUTINIZING WOMEN, VIOLENCE AND IDENTITIES: IN PERSPECTIVE OF PSYCHE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract

Amidst mapping the global literature, Indian Women writers have made a mark in portraying various issues, essentially focusing on issues of women at large. My study involves exploration of women in Bharati Mukherjee's selected novels, The Tiger's Daughter (1971), Wife (1975), and Jasmine (1989). She has reiterated women and their tormenting experiences in India and also in America. The novels are outstanding examples of literary projection of issues tackling gender, in traditional patriarchal families and male dominating societies. The endeavour is to capture the cultural fluctuations and cracking identities in woman characters afflicted by anguish. The characters undergo transformation enveloping myriad emotions. Bharati Mukherjee, depicts modern women who display duality in cultures and identities, one of the native country and the other of the host country, which irrevocably grips them in psychological traumas. Tara in The Tiger's Daughter displays cultural shock and multiple identities. Dimple in Wife, becomes a fractured psyche displays cross culture, and lost identity and Jasmine in Jasmine displays strength and rebels against traditional attitude towards widows, despises sati system and reproves male dominant society which discourages her liberty. All these characters face the bitterness of violence in the struggle to survive. The challenges are immense and the pain profound, immigrant women are in search of independent identity, a life of harmony in America. Some are lost and rootless, others re-root themselves all from 'third world' to make a place in the 'first world'.

Key words: Violence, Identities, cultural shock and psyche

In the transnational world of contemporary times which is marked by trajectory of people, mass exodus is a common practice, typically from developing third world nations like west Asia and African countries, to the developed first world or the Multinational countries. These global movements have given rise to expatriate writers who carry their native country in their experience and weave them in narration bringing out issues of immigration at large. Under the rubric of 'diaspora, expatriate writings include the themes such as, the histories of slavery and indentured labour, the material aspects of migrant labor and livelihood, the occurrence of displacement and homelessness (the 'politics of dispossession' as Said called it), the ideologies of 'home' and nation, the cultures of diaspora, the politics of cross culture, the predicament of minorities, the exilic perspective, the redefinition of cosmopolitanism, identity questions like, (belonging, 'national origins', assimilation, acculturation), and issues relating to race, sexuality and gender. Indian diasporic writers bring the chaos constructed as cause of the national turbulence use hybrid contexts mediating through migrations and diasporic locations, V.S.Naipaul Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Kamala Markhandaya, Bharati Mukharjee, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and many other writers have all made their names in Indian English writings. They have given more poignancy to the exploration by dealing not only with a geographical dislocation but also a socio-cultural sense of displacement. The women's fiction in postcolonial context foregrounds female identities and more number of women writers are emerging contributing to the global literature. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the exceptional writers, negotiating gender and ethnic inference of subjectivity, contributed to an unequivocal fiction usually portraying women who leave India in order to immigrate to North America. Her writings are a paradigm, depicting relationship between contemporary diaspora and gender.

The paper explores Bharati Mukherjee's three novels namely, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989), portraying particularly women characters, contesting cultural identities, violence undergoing a major change as a consequence of their diasporic experience. The immigration and violence brings about drastic changes pulling them into a whirlpool of cracking identities. The analysis is to picture the discrimination of immigrant women in society dominated by men in native or host counties challenging identities in cultural perspectives. Bharati Mukherjee is an expatriate Indian American writer who has contributed to an unequivocal fiction. She is known for her portrayal of immigration who come under willingly immigrate, contrasting to the earlier forced displacements for example the African origin who descended from slave migrations. Her initial writings are focused on racist issues affiliated to V.S.Naipaul's style of fiction like *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) in which the characters are set in Caribbean. However later she steered her style mapping gender in cross culture, post colonialism, and globalization. Mukherjee's

multicultural identity makes her scrutinize into the immigrant characters creating mirror images as most of the immigrant writers display their experience in their writings. Mukherjee's novels show divergence in her style of writings different from other European writers. The present novels are imbued in modern mixed cultural identity, depicted in a state of oscillation, generating psychological anomalies of hybridity. The women characters establish relationships among the multinational individuals in America. Bharati Mukherjee being an expatriate herself from upper middle class family immigrates to America for higher education. India for the University of Iowa in the United States of America in 1962, where she met and married the writer Clark Blaise. In Canada she confronts racism and multiple cultural encounters, negative response and cultural discrimination, the psychological sufferings, the traces of which are articulated in her novels. *An Invisible Woman*, an essay is an example of Canadian racism and multiculturalism emphasizes the paradoxes involved in her everyday experience of living in Canada.

Her novels *The Tigers Daughter* (1972) *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989), measure the American modern influence on the native traditional roots. She contributes a common literary projection of concerns dealing with "native and western ideology in a way that has been considered provocative by many postcolonial critics" (Sandra 77). Feminism is the foremost theme present in her novels, Tara, Dimple and Jasmine all encounter violence and juggle to assume a steady identity. She is influenced by her deep rooted notions of feminism in her upbringing and traditions set by her mother, where women are condemned to a subservience role and are considered a disgrace whereas, sons are prized. Her women characters undergo themes blend of immigrant woven ethnicity with a touch of modernity and transformation resulting in cross cultural identity. In a sense they 'imitate' American but think Indian. On immigration they suffer psychological imbalance, which I term it as "post immigration traumas".

However Mukherjee resists herself from being called a feminist. In an interview in 1993 by Runar Vignissan, **to a question on feminism**, Mukherjee opines:

I don't call myself any 'ist' and I don't follow any 'isms'. I think that my women characters are strong, they're durable, things don't always work out for them but the ones that I like, the ones that do alright, like *Jasmine*, are doers and they shy away from too much self-analysis, too much verbalising about the state of being. They dislike rhetoric, indulging in feminist rhetoric quite often, but they end up really changing their lives. Bharati Mukherjee: an interview with Runar Vignissan (**SPAN Journal**, 34-35)

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the dedicated Indo American voices who brought forth women consciousness and women centric themes in immigration and transnational writings in a heterogeneous context. She discusses issues like dislocation, homelessness, identity flux, cultural conflict and question of identity. Bharati Mukherjee has a unique way of portraying gender versions avoiding stereotyped sentimental exaggerations as most of the Indian writers; in fact she restores the beauty of narration. Mukherjee has so far produced five novels namely, *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to me* (1997), *Desirable Daughter* (2004) *The Tree Bride* (2006). In addition two short story collections the *Darkness* and *The Middle man and other stories*.

The study gauges these predicaments faced by women at home and host countries. In the three novels *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), on cross culture perspectives, Mishra introduces in *The Diasporic Imaginary and the Indian Diaspora* Mishra in the opening lines quotes from Anna Karenina: "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way" (Vijay Mishra 2005). Rightly Mishra observes that immigrants are discontented of hyphenated identities and experiencing "post immigration traumas". Mukherjee's main objective is to catch the Indian nativity from the third world undergoing challenges in the first world countries and especially America and these characters are unhappy in their own way. *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), is one of Mukherjee's first novel which cross culture subjected where she is suspended from two worlds one home and another alien country. Tara is subjected to immense insecurities and fears in a strangeness of alienation in America and also worried of girls like her being knifed in elevators. Tara being married to a foreign man, an American it is expected for a broadminded outlook with modern adaptive cultural attitude but she confronts contradicting situations. Eventually their incompatible marriage makes her realize that in America is bonding of two people where as in India it is bonding of families. David finds Indian customs and habits foolish like, "Why three baths a day for God's sake?" he asks (48). After seven years in America she returns to India only to feel that she wants to return again. Sunetra Gupta's novel, *Memories of Rain*, a story of a Bengali woman Moni, who comes to live in England after marrying an Englishman, Anthony. Moni faces fractured diasporic identity and unable to stand the overwhelming stress, returns with her six-year-old daughter to Calcutta. For both of them immigration brings cross cultural variations and which finds themselves in a strange situation. Tara is succumbed to shattered withdrawn drastic native culture changes. She realizes that her memories have disheveled, and her identity a blurred image a sense of nowhere-ness engulfs her. Tara is confused of whether, New York was exotic or not and if it was, then why was she compelled for a return? Tara's dilemma ripped her into two selves:

New York, she thought now, had been exotic. Not because it had laundromats and subways. But because there were policemen with dogs prowling the underground tunnels and subways. But Because girls like her, at least almost 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).

Amidst all the insiders she feels an outsider and is alienated. Hall says, "Late-modern societies, he argues, are characterized by 'difference' they are cut through by different social divisions and social antagonisms which produce a variety of different 'subject positions' -i.e. identities"(Hall 600).On a gruesome day, Tara on a picnic to Calcutta with her friends, meets the industrialist P.K.Tuntunwala who exploits her at Nayapur resort in her own room. This violence in her life makes her cynical and makes her realize that her return was a mistake. At the end of the story, Tara is on the horns of dilemma, trapped in her fiat car in the middle of agitating mob speculating whether she will ever get out of Calcutta or her husband will ever know that she loves him intensely.

According to Clifford the concept of return is possible if the host country is a bad host contest "...the myths/memories of the homeland, alienation of the host (bad host?) country, desires for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship. (Clifford 305).

Tara's unhappiness in the host country brings her to India but facing alienation at home makes her realize that it was a blunder. Tara Banerjee's return to India after seven years stay in America is a depiction of Mukherjee's own experience. After this gap, Tara sees apparent changes in culture. Her Bombay relatives feel strange that she, being a married woman is not accompanied by her husband, David, which was unacceptable for them. According to Indian tradition, a man should lead the woman, protective her and accompany her so her travelling alone, living alone is scorned. Mukherjee Ironically makes a condemnation of the traditional outlook of the Indians who are passionate of immigration for foreign things and clothes marriage not accept to a foreigner whom they call 'mleccha'(109). This estranges her in her own country. Most immigrations mean conflict of cultures, struggle for identity and insecurity of belongingness. Hall examines that the identities in modern societies are not breaking up but:

A distinctive type of structural change is transforming modern societies in the late twentieth century. This is fragmenting the cultural landscapes of class, gender sexuality, ethnicity race nationality which gave us firm location as social individuals, undermining our sense of ourselves as

integrated subjects. This loss of a stable 'sense of self' is sometimes called the dislocation or – de centering of the subject. This set of double displacements – de centering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves – constitutes a 'crisis of identity' for the individual (Hall 596-597)

Tara is an example of immigrant identity who represents a person of bewilderment in the study of a displaced person in native as well as alien soil, undergoes crisis of identity.

In the second novel *Wife* Dimple migrates to America but finds it difficult to adjust with the new culture and undergoes cultural transformation. Her Indian rich culture did not prevent her from degrading moral values and selfish desires. She is a woman who only enjoys the shadowed life under the fancies of fake modernity. Pathetically her child bearing also is considered as an obstacle for her pleasures. In a country where motherhood is hailed, Dimple, heartlessly kills her foetus, blinded by her dreams. "She had skipped rope until her legs grew numb and her stomach burned" (43). Violence engulfs her distorted mind because of unfulfilled desires and frustrations. Questions are raised regarding her womanhood she is being despised for dispassionate action. Mukherjee depicts the extent a crazy person can take for fanciful life abroad. It is not only also ethical suicide but also cultural suicide. Dimple meets Indians and native Americans, Ina, the notorious wife of Bijoy Mullick, who is a completely liberated and culturally aloof. Dimple seems more and more dejected as dissatisfaction engulfs like bad woman. Her immigrant experience makes her bitter Amit fails to impress her keep up to his expectations, so she feels betrayed. Eventually the negative influence overwhelms her psyche. Kobena Mercer a cultural critic, observes, "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis" (qtd. in Hall 597). Dimple is gripped by identity crisis leading her to nostalgia and loneliness which drives her to isolation. The isolation is overtaken by psychological disintegration. Mukherjee brings about the cross cultural influences on the immigrants and the plight of degradation when buoyed by excess of freedom. The influence is transformation, which ultimately leads her into violence by stabbing her husband to death. Dimple's character displays cross culture, with lost identity in transformation mentally and physically can have negative influence such as anti social element. Mukherjee illustrates through the character that freedom and unlimited desires may lead to unending frustrations, they are ignorant to the positivity around them rather than the negativity.

The third novel *Jasmine* where gender bias is a typical family culture and Jyoti considered as a curse to be born fifth daughter and seventh of the nine children. She is caught in her fate not even her beauty can get her good husband in dowry ridden marriage system. Her birth is considered as unfortunate. She encounters first violence in her life who fights and kills a dog. "They brought and made a fuss over me" (57). Though she is smart in

her studies and when she voices her dream to become a doctor, her father gets infuriated shouting “The girl is mad!...Blame the mother .Instantly has to come from somewhere. It’s the mother who is mad” (51). Mukherjee wants bring the women’s second class identity in traditional families. At the age of fourteen she marries Prakash, who dreams is to migrate with his wife Jyoti to the U.S. Prakash moves her feudalistic family and wants to uplift to modern woman he changes her name from Jyoti to Jasmine .The novel is set on historical back drop of political turbulence. Prakash being a supporter of secularism is targeted by his Sikh friend Sukhwinder and gets killed. Jasmine witnesses violence for a second time. She consoles herself “That Jyoti is dead.”(96).Mukherjee shows Jasmine as a woman of strength. Jyoti desires to die in *sati*, the ritual where the wife dies on husband’s pyre, but her husband’s dream and mission, stops her from doing so. A similar instance is faced by her mother, when she was held back to die on her father’ pyre, she “shaved her head with a razor, wrapped her body in coarse cloth” (61).These two instances expose age old suppressions on women who seem to bound by their Husbands’ identity. She desires to commit ritual suicide by burning Prakash’s clothes and hers. Jasmine goes to America to fulfill her husband’s dream and her mission to performing sati by burning their clothes. In Florida she encounters third violence. Half-Face the captain of the ship mercilessly rapes her and Jasmine takes revenge by transforming herself by slitting her tongue as Kali, the goddess of destruction of the evil and kills him. The illustration of goddess Kali by Mukherjee, the Indian mythological strategy as (Sandra P), observes “...Indian mythology in order to validate passages that would be considered ‘unrealistic’ to western standards, perfectly legitimate with fictional account” (89). In America she meets her saviour Lillian Gorden. Jasmine transforms her and into a modern American woman and names her Jazzy. Jasmine’s identity oscillates changing names with spatial movements. At Taylor’s and Wylie Hayes place she joins as a care giver for their adopted daughter, Duff. She makes a life for herself amidst American strangers.From rootless to rooted, Jasmine, starts afresh in an alien land far away from her native land “ America may be fluid and on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted” (179). She feels satisfied that there are no more tears haunted by rootlessness. Taylor gives her new name her ‘Jase’. Fate makes her flee from her rooting ‘housed’ position. when she sees Sukhi, her husband’s murderer in the park. She lands Budd Ripplemeyer a fifty year old banker. He falls in love with her and transforms her and gives her name ‘Jane’. However she takes bold steps to make decisions like choosing between duty and aspirations, she prefers the latter and abandons Bud. “I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of American and old dutifulness.”(240). Jasmine’s adapting to various names in association with various people, show her fluctuating identity but nevertheless she shows acceptance to change and

modernity. Jasmine, a third world immigrant survives the pressure of the western culture and ultimately proves her cross cultural existence in the first world.

Hall in 1996 observes that identity is not acquired on centrifugal migrations by only present host nation on contrary culture and identity are interlinked. It maps the past and progresses in the future. He says, that it is “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.”(Hall 225 cultural identity). Tara, Dimple and Jasmine are a result of churning of cultural identity reflected from past transcending into future. The three women characters from economical distinct classes, Tara from an educated and prosperous family, Dimple, from a middle class family and Jasmine a lower class family, irrespective of class and social background, on immigration confront both physical and psychological predicaments, in host as well as home country. Diaspora essentially is a medium which leads to alienation and bitter experience through which the immigrants suffer cross cultural conflicts resulting in “post immigration traumas”. Mukherjee shows variation in violence intensity in these novels with changes in global movements. In the later novels like *Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World* and *Desirable Daughters*, the women characters undergoing psychological transformation. The gender roles ascribed as daughter, sister, mother, step mother wife and widow, depict strength of adaptability, redefining them in the global immigration. Mukherjee’s novels epitomize the emerging modern women’s search for dreams fulfillment, emotions and quest for identity.

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