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ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURAL CONSENT: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
SELECTED NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee 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 endeavored to dive deep into the distorted psyche of those immigrants who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values. In her characters there is an inherent fascination for Western mode of living that they have chosen out of their professional compulsions or for their urge to achieve a greater freedom in liberal and dynamic society of America. The focus in Bharati Mukherjee fiction is on the predicament of migrants and the possibilities for their absorption and rejection in the new world. Her most remarkable works reflect not only her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. In her writings she voices her own experiences to show the changing shape of American society.

Key words: immigrations, outmigration, autonomous selfhood, globalization, absorption and rejection, Diaspora, stereotype.

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INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee's writing is striking because in her novels one finds the novelist rising above the stereotype. What makes her stand apart from the orthodoxy of female representation is her refusal to present assumptions regarding Indian women, their felicity of marriage and its satisfactions. At the point of intersection between one's own country and the other adopted country which invades the protected area of feeling and affection. the portrait of Mukherjee's protagonist becomes interesting. She admits:

I am in fact writing about America more than about dark-complexioned Immigrants. My focus is on the country on how it is changing minute by minute. My stories explore the encounter between the mainstream American culture and the new one formed by the migrant stream. I'm really writing about the seams joining two cultures. Many expatriate writers are destroyed by their duality, I personally feel nourished by it.

Because of the distinctly different experiences she has had throughout her life, she has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life-first, as a colonial, then a national subject in

India. She then led a life of exile as a post-colonial India in Canada. Finally, she shifted into a celebratory mode as an immigrant, then citizen in the United States. She now fuses her several lives and backgrounds together with the intention of creating a "new immigrant" literature.

Bharati Mukherjee considers her work a celebration of her emotions, and herself a writer of the Indian Diaspora who cherishes the "melting pot" of America. Her main theme throughout her writing centers on the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world.

When Bharati Mukherjee published her first book, *The Tiger's Daughter*, in 1972, few would have predicted that she would be one of the leading fictional chroniclers of the South Asian Diaspora and a writer who would make the phenomenon of the massive migration of South Asian to North America her major theme. True, *The Tiger's Daughter* has as its central character, Tara Banerjee Cartwright, an Indian woman who has married an American and settled in New York, but the novel is set entirely in Calcutta and is concerned almost exclusively with Tara's attempt to come to terms with the fact that she can no longer connect to the city of her birth or find in it her home. That is to say, the theme of *The Tiger's Daughter* is not outmigration, although at the end of the novel Tara has realized that by settling in America and marrying there she had cut herself adrift from Calcutta and the people she had grown up with.

The Tiger's Daughter reflects the confrontation between illusion and reality. *The Tiger's Daughter* had adopted the technique of documentation to bring out the contrast between two worlds and two attitudes. An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it. Tara was packed off by her father at early age of fifteen for America, because he was prompted by suspicion and pain about his army. Tara is homesick in Poughkeepsie. Little things pained her. She sensed discrimination if her roommate did not share her mango chutney. She defended her family and her country vehemently. She prayed to Kali for strength, so that she would not break down, before the Americans. New York was extraordinary and it had driven her to despair: "On days when she had thought she could not possibly survive, she had shaken out all her silk scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more Indian."

It was fate that she fell in love with an American. Tara's husband David was painfully Western; she was dutifully devious in her marriage. She could not communicate the finer nuances of her family background and life in Calcutta. Her husband asked naive questions about Indian customs and traditions. She felt completely insecure in an alien atmosphere. "Madison Square was unbearable and her husband was after all a foreigner."

After a gap of seven years Tara planned a trip to India, for years she had dreamed of this return. She believed that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta. With the precision of a newspaper reporter, Bharati Mukherjee leads her heroine through a series of adventures and misadventures to a final self-realization and reconciliation. Tara's homesick eyes / noticed many changes in the city of Calcutta. Tara has no more an Indian identity and is always in clash with the culture of her native soil. The clash is deeply felt in the psyche of Tara who finds it difficult to adjust with her friends and relatives in India; and sometimes with the traditions of her own family. At the Bombay airport she responds to her relatives in a cold and dispassionate manner. When her relatives call her "Tul Tul" it sounds strange to her Americanized ears. The railway station looks like a hospital with so many sick and deformed men sitting on the bundles and trunks. In the compartment she finds it difficult to travel with a Marwari and a Nepali. Now she considers America a dream land. When surrounded by her relatives and vendors at the Howrah railway station Tara feels uncomfortable. It is likely that she hates everyone and everything in India where she was born, brought up and taught many values, all because of her acculturation in America. She was outraged, and could not respond to these changes. She longed for the Bengal of Satyajit Ray, children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces. What confronted her was a restive city which forced weak men to fanatical defiance or dishonesty. Calcutta was losing its memories in a bonfire of effigies, buses and trams. An appetite for the grotesque had taken over the

city: "Tragedy was not uncommon in Calcutta. The newspapers were full of epidemics, stretching before her was the vision of modern India."

The writer interlinks the events-like Tara's visit to a funeral pyre at the river bank, her meeting a small beggar girl afflicted with leprosy, The vision of beggar children eating off the street, the superficialities in the lives of her friends, the riots and demonstrations and her claustrophobic rape by the politician Tuntunwala-to bring out the trauma of Tara's visit to India. Her personality now resists digesting the changed atmosphere in her native place and in her friends. Slowly her changed personality makes her a misfit in the company of her old friends. She feels alienated when her relatives call her 'Americawali' and her husband 'mleccha'. The foreignness of her spirit refuses to establish an emotional kinship with her old friends and relatives. The greatest irony of her return is that she feels loneliness in her native land. Tara's visit to Darjeeling is also marred by ugly and violent incidents. Tara is able to understand the changes in her personality due to her total Americanisation. Inspired by her Westernization, she cannot face the disease and despair, riot and poverty of people in Calcutta. There occurs a conflict in her mind between her old sense of perception in Calcutta and her present changed outlook.

Many of Tara's doubts and conflicts are resolved by the strength, determination and quiet dignity of her parents. Antonia Whitehead an American lends Tara a fresher and clearer perspective about her own country. Antonia Whitehead had decided to make India her home, for she believed that India needed help. Tara realized that her earlier responses to Calcutta had also been similarly impatient, menacing and equally innocent. The visit to the ashram of Mata Kananbala Devi makes her share her love for her mother as well as the worshippers. The Indian dream is shattered but the writer leads the heroine to a final reconciliation: "Camac Street had felt the first stirrings of death. With new dreams like Nayapur, Tara's Calcutta was disappearing. New dreams occurred with each new bull-dozer incision in the green romantic hills. Slow learners like Tara were only victims."

At the end of the novel, Tara is involved in a violent demonstration, in which Joyob Roy Chawdhury a symbol of the old world order is brutally beaten to death. Pronob the youth tries to save him, but is he injured in the process. This was a course of history which could not be stopped. "She felt she had made peace with the city, nothing more was demanded." In this novel, we see Mukherjee's ambivalence at being an immigrant in Canada, for when Tara's American husband, David, writes to her, he says, "I miss you very much. But I understand you have to work this out". He wants her to work out her identity by finding out whether it lies with the old country or the new. Tara feels that "in India she was not married to a person, but to a foreigner and this foreignness was a burden".

This implies that even in her land, with her Western outlook and education, Tara felt an alien, as she did in North America where she was racially an outsider. Thus there is alienation at two levels. In the end, the two worlds cannot be reconciled, and since the alienation from the mother country seems stronger, Tara chooses to return to David and America. Though at cross-roads still, we get the impression, that the author is now one step closer towards psychologically working out the old country from her psyche.

Mukherjee's second book, *Wife* (1975), reflects the shift that had resulted the novelist's perspective because of her yearlong stay in Calcutta in 1973. Mukherjee's *Wife* presents a feminist perspective, creating an image of the oppressed woman, Dimple who struggles with her identity but does not know it. She is subject to the desires and whims of others and has been socialized to be unaware of her own desire for an independent identity. She believes she wants to be a wife, but her longing is confused with her desire for freedom. She is also unaware that such a role will not grant her those desires. Although the novel begins in an Indian city, most of it is set in New York. The Calcutta scenes show the central character Dimple Dasgupta becoming Dimple Basu through her marriage to Amit Kumar Basu, an engineer who is deemed to be eminently marriageable because he has good prospects of immigrating to North America. As the newly married couple wait for the outcome of Amit's application for immigration, Dimple discovers how stilling the life of a wife in a Calcutta joint-family can be. While she is naive and unstable and even a little vacuous, Dimple attracts our sympathy because she seems ready to transgress the limit imposed on middle-class Bengali women of her class and

status and is eager to be herself. Dimple finds herself further removed, now in an even more unfamiliar society when they immigrate to America. She sees in those Indians who surround her further reflections of what she should and should not be. That is why America is so attractive an option for her and that is why she goes to the extent of inducing an abortion before leaving for New York she would like to enter America absolutely unfettered and would rather lose her baby than give up her chance to be "a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, [and] become a librarian." Unlike Amit, who has come to America for purely economic reasons, Dimple, then, is chasing a dream of liberation and self-fulfillment in New York, no matter how confused and uncertain she is about the route to be pursued in realizing that dream.

Wife thus explores the different imperatives that lead to outmigration. As far as Mukherjee is concerned, the difference between Amit's goal in migrating and Dimple's expectations from America is one being played out all the time in North American immigrant communities. As she states the case in an interview:

[When an Asian man comes to America] he comes for economic transformation, and he brings a wife who winds up being psychologically changed. This is one of the tragedies you see being played out in all the New Jersey shopping malls these days. The Indian women walking around in the malls with nothing to do all day, while the men are out busily making money. The men have a sense of accomplishment. They have no idea of staying here. The idea is saving money and going, but they don't realize the women have been transformed.

Foreshadowing the climax of the novel, Dimple had then exclaimed that it wasn't murder, that she could never commit murder. There is little early evidence that Dimple will act violently toward others, since the violence she fantasizes about is largely self-imposed; she imagines her own suicide regularly, compiling a list of various ways to succeed and even using it as a way of "counting sheep" to sleep. Being found dead would grant her some form of identity. But once, when Amit sneaks up to embrace her, she lashes at him with a knife, reflecting how impulsive her nature can be when she responds instinctively to the uncontrollable fears she has of her environment.

Wife ends climactically, with Dimple committing murder after all. She kills Amit by stabbing at the mole on his face, her realities so confused that she is not fully aware of her own actions. Again it is depicted like a dream. She is symbolically freed from the power Amit and their marriage had over her through this violent act and seems to hope to embrace such freedom since she believes women on television get away with murder. It is ironic that with a name like Dimple, she chooses to kill Amit by stabbing at his mole. Her identity might simply be described as the slight indentation for which she is named, and in vengeance she has sought Amit's much more identifiable facial features as the target for her frustrations.

Consultation

The novel is written in three sections, the first taking place in Calcutta, the second in America while Amit and Dimple are living with Sens, and the third when they are subletting an apartment in Manhattan. *Wife* develops many of the themes for which Mukherjee's work is celebrated in her depiction of the life of one woman exiled from her country and herself.

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