



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.1., 2017 (Jan-Mar.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DIASPORIC CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT

Diaspora is defined as the dispersion of any people from their traditional homeland. Diasporic literature of the 21st century is enriched by the issues of diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity and identity crisis. These are reflected in the writings of Salman Rushdie, Amitabh Ghosh, V.S.Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee and many others. Bharati Mukherjee in her novels attempt to bridge the gulf between "home" and "exile". Nostalgia, directness towards the culture you are absorbing, restitching and the divided settler evolving into a permanent alien getting transformed into a perfect immigrant are the elements of consciousness. In the present paper an attempt has been made to investigate or recognise the elements of diasporic consciousness in Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

Keywords: Diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity, assimilation, identity crisis

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INTRODUCTION

The term diaspora is rooted in Jewish history. This was used initially for the dispersal of Jews when they were forced into exile to Babylonia. The etymological origin of diaspora can be traced to ancient Greek civilization where it meant scattering as a result of migration or geographical upheaval. Diaspora is an umbrella term which includes a variety of meanings such as exile, expatriation, migration and refuge. The Oxford English dictionary defines diaspora as, "The dispersion of any people from their traditional homeland". Life in diaspora discloses one's struggle to adopt a new culture while retaining the native culture. Dispersion in space, orientation to a 'homeland' and boundary maintenance is the core elements of diaspora. Dispersion in space indicates "forced or otherwise traumatic dispersion" of people. Homeland orientation, the second element of diaspora, refers to "the orientation to a real or imagined 'homeland' as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty". The third component of diaspora indicates "the preservation of a distinctive identity (Brubaker). These varied and yet generalised concept have been highlighted by William Safran in his book *Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return* where he speaks of the nostalgic yearning of the early immigrants and how "their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship" (84). Indian theoretical perspective defines the nature of the diasporic self as 'Viksipta', divided or fragmented.

The diasporic literature of the twenty first century is enriched by the issues of diaspora, transnationalism, cultural mongrelisation, hybridity and identity crisis. A complex framework in the field of global migration is formed by the cultural transaction, multiculturalism, topographical shifting and fluid identity. Apart from these, the concept of root, home, nostalgia, memory, alienation, hybrid identity are interlinked with the diasporic phenomenon. In the writings of Salman Rushdie, Agha Shahid Ali, Amitabh Ghosh, V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and many others, they have used the diasporic elements which are also used as the current themes in their literary works.

Bharati Mukherjee in her novels like the *Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife, Jasmine*, *The Holder of the World*, *Leave it to Me*, *Desirable Daughters* and the *Tree Bride* attempt to bridge the gulf between "home" and "exile". Being a writer of the Indian Diaspora, she in her novels cherishes the "melting pot" concept of America. Her main theme throughout her writing centres on the condition of Asian immigrants in the USA and Canada, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world. The diasporic experience can be judged in terms of its manifestation in the attitude to home and host. There are three elements which separate these attitudes from one to the other. One is that of the exile who has nostalgia for the home country and whose attitude to the host country is negative. The 'double diaspora' is characterised by a dispersed, constructed nostalgia and some approval of one, if not both the hosts. One time diasporic has a negative stand and nostalgia. Bharati Mukherjee's novels fall in this category.

Nostalgia, directness towards the culture you are absorbing, re-stitching and the divided settler evolving into a permanent alien and getting transformed into a perfect immigrant are the elements of consciousness. In the present paper an attempt has been made to investigate or recognise the seven elements of diasporic consciousness like memory, return, strangeness, desire to integrate, transience, desire for permanence, a sense of belonging and embedding in Bharati Mukherjee's novels. The paradigm of the diasporic experience may be identified as enunciating, renouncing and denouncing.

Diasporas live in one country as community but look across time and space to another. The migrant Diasporas and their descendent experience displacement, fragmentation, marginalization and discontinuity in the cultural discourse of the subject countries. They retain a collective memory, vision or myth about their original homeland, its physical location, history, festivals and achievements.

According to William Safran, the globally dispersed expatriate minority communities are to be brought within the distinct category of 'Diaspora' if the members of those communities fulfil these following characteristics:

- (1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original "centre" to two or more "peripheral", or foreign regions;
- (2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland, its physical location, history and achievements;
- (3) they believe that they are not and perhaps cannot be fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulted from it;
- (4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return when conditions are appropriate;
- (5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity;
- (6) and they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another and their ethno communal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (83-84)

As Avtar Brah writes:

What is home? On the one hand home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'Origin'. On the other hand home is also a lived experience of locality. It's sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day, all this as mediated by the historically specific of every day social networks. (192)

Bharati Mukherjee, the expatriate novelist has dealt in her novel *Desirable Daughters* the theme of the need to have a boundary to mark out the native identity as essential. Identity is intertwined with the concepts of

home, root and origin. Therefore these identity markers need defined cultural, psychological and geographical boundaries and borders to reinforce the essence of human existence.

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the finest Indian diasporic writers who deals with the “phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates” as well as on Indian women and their struggle (Alam). Her works can be divided into three distinctive phases. Her earlier works such as *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Day’s and Night’s in Calcutta* unfold her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. The second phase of her writing includes works such as *Wife, Darkness, An Invisible Woman* and *The Sorrow and the Terror*. These works explore the immigrants’ experience of racism in Canada. The third phase of her writing encompasses works such as *Jasmine* and *The Middleman and Other stories*. These works explore the immigrants’ experience rather than nostalgia. She depicts the meeting of East and West through immigrant experience. Her early writings gave a pessimistic account of rootlessness and depict the immigrant characters as “lost souls, put upon and pathetic adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong” (*Darkness XII-XIV*), whereas her recent writings celebrate “the exuberance of immigration” (*Darkness XV*).

Bharati Mukherjee in her novels explores the struggle of immigrants living in the United States and Canada. In her fiction she mirrors her own life as an immigrant first to Canada and later to the United States. Many of her characters are Indian women who are victims of racism and sexism. We can discern two themes in her works. The first is the immigrant experience and the feeling of alienation as an expatriate. The second is the mistreatment of women in Indian society owing to the overburdening expectation to conform to societal norms and tradition.

Mukherjee in her first novel, *The Tiger’s Daughter* a loosely autobiographical story about an East Indian immigrant who is unable to adjust to North American culture, but who at the same time is painfully aware that she will never again belong in the culture she has left behind. This novel addresses Mukherjee’s personal difficulties of being caught between two worlds, home and exile. *The Tiger’s Daughter* can also be seen as the story of a young girl named Tara who comes back to India after seven long years of being away, and on her return finds only poverty and turmoil. It reflects Mukherjee’s own experience of coming back to India with her American husband in 1973, when she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of India. The novel is a starting point with Mukherjee’s treatment of the theme of the conflict between Eastern and Western Worlds, as in her other works. Tara is born in Calcutta, schooled in the States and married to an American gentleman. After spending seven years abroad, the beautiful, luminous Tara leaves her American husband behind and comes back to India. But the place she finds on her return full of strikes, riots and unrest is vastly different from the place she remembers. Yet she seeks to reconcile the old world that of her father, the ‘Bengal Tiger’ with the new one of her husband David.

Mukherjee introduces Tara to her readers with typical yearning of an ‘exile’ for her ‘home’. Tara Banerjee Cartwright makes a trip to India, her home, after staying seven long years in America. When she places her foot on the soil of her dearest home, she feels that ‘home is no more home’. She finds it tough to adjust to her friends and relatives in India, even with the traditions of her own family. Tara becomes lonely in her own native land, whereas she was expecting for a long time in America that, “all shadowy fears of the time abroad would be erased quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta” (*Daughter*).

In the story of *Desirable Daughters* there are three sisters who grow up in Calcutta and eventually are scattered in three different corners of the globe with their individual lifestyles. Padma leaves in New Jersey among the elite class of Indian migrants. Parvati leads a comfortable life in a posh locality in Mumbai in a typically aristocratic Hindu family. She always keeps herself busy in household chores. Tara lives in the West in California leading a dull life after getting a divorce from her business-magnate husband. It is a story of adjustment of human beings in different circumstances. The story has a post-colonial background. It’s a blending of belongingness and exile. Tara Chatterjee, the narrator, is the youngest of the three sisters. She has the same position of Tara of *The Tiger’s Daughter*, trapped between the two worlds: the old and the new. At nineteen Chatterjee got married to Bish Chatterjee, a wealthy man. Now at forty, she is a divorcee living in San Francisco with her teenage son and her boyfriend. Mukherjee has dealt in the need to have a boundary to

mark out the native identity as essential. Identity is intertwined with the concepts of home, root and origin. Therefore these identity markers need defined cultural, psychological and geographical boundaries and borders to reinforce the essence of human existence.

Tara, the female protagonist and the narrator of the novel, narrates the story because in her words "... I am exploring the making of a consciousness" (5), it is a story of " roots search" (17) and in all this it entails her return to India and subsequently to Dacca, the erstwhile India of 1879.

The problem of alienation experienced by the immigrants is very well portrayed by Mukherjee in her powerful novel *Jasmine*. *Jasmine* the protagonist of the novel, fights against unfavourable circumstances comes out a winner and carves out a new life in an alien country. Unlike *Wife*, *Jasmine* tells the success story of its protagonist. It traces the eventful life of a young Punjabi girl who is transported from Hasnapur, a small village in Punjab, to the shores of America, and who undergoes many transformations on her way. She fights against unfavourable circumstances in her own land and then in the alien country, and makes a triumphant entry into the mainstream American life.

Jasmine is an exile in flight from the old world of India and old cultural values. Her sense and sensibilities are actively engaged with the world outside her, leaving no time to reflect on the problems, whether life is meaningful, or why one should think of East, West, North or South when one can be a singular self as culture and history would shape one. But in creating such a character, in attempting to re-locate the character in a desired but alien environment, Mukherjee does not probe the inner consciousness of the protagonist nor does she depict the deeper struggle the Americans undergo in relating to each other. *Jasmine* takes the bird-view of the American life and does not touch the deeper layers of values there.

Not only *Jasmine* even the other characters in *Jasmine* are all exiles, expatriates, wanderers and people on the move, casting off old lives easily as a snake sheds its skin. They are Third World refugees fleeing poverty and oppression, but they are also Americans moving from Coast to Coast, small towns to cities, exchanging one partner to another, in search of a dream that always seems to elude them. A feeling of dislocation, displacement and rootlessness is a heavy price they must pay for the infinite freedom and possibilities that America offers. Everyone in *Jasmine* appears to be reeling from the speed of changes overpowering them.

Conclusion

At first glance, the list of Mukherjee's works looks like the haphazard offerings of an energetic and prolific writer. But on closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that all of Mukherjee's creativity is focused with razor sharp precision on a diasporic imagination and the politico-cultural implications of this imagination. The trope of diaspora, of dislocation, transcends the rhetorical dimension of the text and becomes the material core of Mukherjee's narrativity. (Emmanuel S. Nelson)

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