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## THE THEME OF ALIENATION AND ASSIMILATION IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT

This paper brings into special focus the immigrant experience of the female self, of being a woman, of being an immigrant woman, the cross-cultural experiences, the immigrant journey, the rootlessness, and the assimilation of the protagonists in her novels. He examines the problem of identity crisis caused by social oppression in society and projects powerful tirade against the superficial practice of multiculturalism and pluralism. The Theme of Alienation and Assimilation. This paper focuses on the women protagonists sharing common experiences and discrimination the traditional society of India in one hand and on another she finds assimilation as a better option for self-survival. It is a critical study of women's character analyzed on the basis of different aspects of cross-culture, presenting a thorough insight of Bharati Mukherjee's cross-cultural sensibility.

Keywords: Assimilation, Alienation, Cross-cultural Sensibility, multiculturalism and pluralism, rootlessness.

### Introduction

Transgressing the boundaries of social restrictions, religiously constructed images, paradigms of domesticity, host of the women writers took stride to construct the experiences and the invisible reactions on those experience to ensure the position of women as a responsible and self-aware human beings retaining the strength of will to register their protest. In the contemporary changing conditions women writers expanded the frontiers of feminist fiction and focused on more rational dynamic issues including women's quest for identity, reaffirmation of their self, confession of personal sexual desires beyond traditional guilt and shame, making choice for alternative relationship, breaking the conventional barriers of traditional moralities, reconstruction of professional identity, giving expression to their resistance and asserting the possibilities of survival beyond male protection. In

this effort women writers of Indian diaspora constructed a magnificent edifice of women experience representing the "crisis of their existence" sharing the burden of two cultures-inherited and acquired. Immigrants retain the shadows of "the twilight existence of the aesthetics of image" (Bhabha 1994:15). Since cultural ideologies are gender specific, pattern of feminine mystique. As immigrant women undergo two challenges simultaneously (a) woman as woman, (b) woman as an immigrant. Women share a strong bonding with natural cultural identity and it seriously affects her process of assimilation in alien culture and also the equilibrium of personal and professional relationship. In the galaxy of women writers of Indian diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Rai Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur set a new ground of feminist fiction constructing the

experiences of Indian immigrant women in the background of multi-culturalism. In their fictional world, they explored the issues of motherhood, awareness of national values, crisis of marital and extra-marital relationship, imbalance in familial relationship and the issues related to female psycho-motherhood, pregnancy, rape, abortion, female sexuality, discontent in marital harmony, alienation, isolation and the quest for belongingness.

Bharati Mukherjee constructs a broad canvass of female centric experience in her well-known novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *Desirable Daughters* (2004) and *The Tree Bride*. In all these novels, Bharati Mukherjee presents women as the protagonist sharing common experience of oppression and discrimination in the traditional society of India. These middle class women migrate to American society in the hope of an emancipated fabric of life. However, they retain the innate sensibility to Indian values and suffer humiliation in the westernized ways of their husbands. They emerge as the victims of humiliation, neglect and isolation. They express the agony for the lost land, lost relationship and lost national values. They survive with their national identity and root cultural values. In *Tiger's Daughter*, the protagonist returns to India with an unexpressed guilt conscience for her marriage to a foreigner who is acknowledged in Indian society as 'Outsider' or 'Maleccha'. She is in persistent struggle to re-root herself in Indian society and ascertain her position as an ideal Indian wife. In the novel *Wife*, Dimple migrates to California to avoid the cramped conventions of Indian society. In marriage, she seeks the possibilities of luxury and freedom and intends to construct an identity of her own. However immigration increases her misery because she fails to modify herself. It increases the gulf in her relationship with her husband. For her marriage becomes a "betrayed" and she comes to the realization. "Every woman was a stronger, where she felt different, ignorant and exposed toridicule in the elevator" (*Wife* 112). Her isolation turns out to be a torture and she becomes frantic. In state of moral vacuum, she kills herself and also kills Amit. She fails to establish a synthesis in religion, culture and morality. Besides her frustration comes out of Amit's

indifference. Bharati Mukherjee accepts that in present middle class educated women looks forward to emotional security and also of social and psychological security.

In the novel *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee constructs the experience of a Punjabi girl who modifies her identities to seek a safe mooring in different cultural climates. She migrates to America as a young widow of limited means and limited education. On her first arrival, she becomes a victim of rape in the hands of Captain known as "Half Face". This incident perverts her consciousness. Under the heat of passion of irresistible anger, she kills "Half Face". It was her unconscious effort to avenge her oppressors. In her encounter with Professor Vadhera, she finds only "artificial Indianness". However instead of withdrawal, she finds assimilation as a better option for self survival. Jasmine retains her femininity and national morality but expresses her determination and confidence to redefine the conditions of life on her own conditions. Even in progressive American society, she encounters discrimination, tortures and the burden of patriarchy on her feminine self. It is her innate maternal instinct that inspires her to retain her relationship in the family of Bud and Taylor. She expresses her quest to modify her life as an Americanized Indian but her idealism of Indian womanhood remains rooted in her inner self and it explicitly reflects in her roles as a caring wife, sensitive mother and affectionate daughter relationships. *The Holder of the World*, (1993) is a novel by Bharati Mukherjee. It is a retelling of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, placing the story in two centuries (17<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>). The novel involves time travel via virtual reality, locating itself in 20<sup>th</sup> century Boston, 17<sup>th</sup> century Colonial America, and 17<sup>th</sup> century India during the spread of the British East India Company.

Similarly Tara Banerjee, the protagonist of *The Desirable Daughters* develops a feeling of 'guilt' and 'betrayal' on the possibilities of merger in American life. In U.S.A. she survives with the psyche of "otherness" and it adversely affects her relations with her husband Bish. Her quest for homeland becomes a nostalgia turning out to be the instinct of 'self-preservation'. She nurtures the dream of the

sanctity of familial relationship and expresses her quest to re-root herself in the company of her parents. In absence of adequate personal relations, she feels a lack of belongingness. She retains her national identity with the markers like language, religion, faith, customs and traditions. In Bharati Mukherjee's fictional world women are not passive shadows of male desires but sensible human beings with the virtues to construct their identity, making an assertion of their protest against the irrational control of male desires. However, instead of negation, she promotes the aesthetics of 'adaptability. About Bharati Mukherjee's women it is said

The kind of women, I write about... are these who are adaptable. We've been raised to please, been trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to be woman's advantage when, we came over as Immigrants. (Connel 2)

Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women. She also uses the female characters to explore the spatio-temporal (Massachusetts to India) connections between different cultures. In *Leave It to Me*, Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby Di Martino, who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents (described as a murderer and a flower child). The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds at mother-daughter relationships.

In the *Tree Bride*, the narrator, Tara Chatterjee (whom readers will remember from *Desirable Daughters*), picks up the story of an East Bengali ancestor. According to legend, at the age of five Tara Lata married a tree and eventually emerged as a nationalist freedom fighter. In piecing together her ancestor's transformation from a docile Bengali Brahmin girl child into an impassioned organizer of resistance against the British Raj, the contemporary narrator discovers and lays claim to unacknowledged elements in her "American" identity. Although the story of the *Tree Bride* is central, the drama surrounding the narrator, a divorced woman trying to get back with her

husband, moves the novel back and forth through time and across continents. "India, past and present, its inhabitants and expatriates, has always formed the framework of Mukherjee's literary world. In this vibrant novel, a sequel to *Desirable Daughters* and her best work to date, the author has fused history, mysticism, treachery and enduring love in a suspenseful story about the lingering effects of past secrets. Bharati Mukherjee describes how Tara experiences the various pangs of the culture of assimilation. It has also been shown how she is pushed to the edges of her old world yet exiled from the new and how she tries vainly to reconcile the exacting demands of the two worlds. "It was so vague, so pointless, so diffuse, this trip to India" (130). Moreover Tara also "knew she could never tell David that the misery of her city was too immense and blurred to be listed and assailed one by one". Caught in the complex web of the quagmire of human relationships Tara finds herself at a crossroad 'That it was fatal to fight for justice, that it was better to remain passive and absorb all shocks as they came.' (131)

Thus, Ms. Mukherjee recounts the lives of the illegal aliens who brave the worst humiliations and sufferings in settling in a new world. The epigraph of the novel from James Gleick's *Chaos* aptly sums up the life of the immigrants: "The new geometry mirrors a universe that is rough, not rounded, scabrous, not smooth. It is a geometry of the pitted, pocked and broken up, the tented, tangled and entertained." Man have migrated to distant lands in search of fortune, some to fulfil their dreams and others have travelled in quest of identity and stability in life. This has been taken up by numerous postmodern novelists. Shahrukh Hussain in his article 'Indian Women Writer in Britain and America – Novels on the Asian experience: Journey to the Promised Land's has described journey as:

"a move from one country or city to another, the experience of meeting people, strange environments and all the paraphernalia that goes with the actual, physical movement from one place to another. In short a substantial change of both landscapes – mental and physical "

Immigration and cultural alienation are global phenomenon in today's modern world. Bharati Mukherjee, like many other postmodern writers, has taken up the problems and experiences faced by the Indian immigrants in the U.S. or the Western world.

Mukherjee devotes her attention to female issues in historical times as well as in the contemporary society. She seems to concur with the view :

People are continually remaking their culture, and in so doing, redefining the past, reconstituting the present and reconceptualising what they derive from the future.

Like any other feminist writer Bharati Mukherjee's women characters offer "a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism."

In the novel, we can see two advantages of women's liberation, which Bharati Mukherjee thinks. First it allows the women to realise their potential as individuals in the wider society. Secondary it is the only means by which it can attain personal recognition.

Her main theme refers to the manifestation of migration and also the complications like alienation, struggle with identity, racism and various other forms of discrimination. Attached with sentiments to her homeland, sequestered with the type of individuals she has usually come in contact with and at ease with the way of life that she had led in her childhood, Bharati Mukherjee feels comfortable in that zone of Indianness where her heart belongs. No power, however modern and dictating, can wipe away or dominate that ethnic and holy attachment that usually one has with one's mother country. Externally we can project our western outlook, as Mukherjee does, but internally we know for whom our heart misses a beat. The roots may be chopped but it is impossible to pull them out, the saplings growing out in the clay of heart can be severed but it's dehumanizing to haul them forever.

Migration of people from their native country to a new country for their own

sophistication, comfort or to satisfy their ambitions and goals in life has become common. Since it is not forced, they willingly dissolve the ties with their motherland and try to identify themselves or assimilate totally with the host country. They go to the extent of imitating their culture and habits when they move back to their homeland. Nevertheless, they feel more foreign than the foreigners in their native country. The migrants having assimilated thus the values of the host country, look forward to a total acceptance. Evidently, they do not want to be called with a hyphenated term but to be identified with the nationals. In spite of their total assimilation, they are given only a fluid identity. Hyphenation is yet another kind of internal marginalization. There is no external force acting as a catalyst, yet the migrants face a depressing situation just as the aborigines who are marginalized from the political and cultural spheres. In this age of diaspora, the biological identity may not be one's only identity. The experience of cutting oneself off from his biological homeland and settling in an adopted homeland that does not welcome and accept them as "their own" has, however, motivated many to produce literary works. The exploration of deception, social shame and the perplexity involved in acculturation are great themes for a novel. And many immigrants would probably identify themselves with these themes.

### Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee not only intends to expand America but to change it, adding the minority point of view, not clear cut assimilation but transformation, a fluid interaction between origin and modernity or in other words, in between hyphenation and assimilation. She believes that if a nation is able to accept and acknowledge immigrants as their own nationals, then there will be no hyphenation but sure assimilation, no sense of alienation but a sense of belonging and satisfaction on having achieved the transformation.

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