

Unhousement To Rehousement : A Cultural Encounter, Ethnicity To Identity In The Novels of Bharati Mukherjee



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ABSTRACT : In the European countries the groups of migrants are called “minority” and “cultural minority” and are considered as a part of “Pluralism”, “cultural–Pluralism” and “multiculturalism.” When a group is socially marginal in comparison to the majority host culture, it is called a “minority group.” The term ethnic has been placed as prefix before the name of the community such as ethnic Indians, ethnic trucks and so on. In literature Ethnicity works as an identity phenomenon meaning the search for self. It defines social boundary of the ethnic groups and develops a strategy of acquiring the resources one needs to survive. The diasporic force which emerges from identity formation becomes ethnicity. Ethnicity becomes an important concern as one shift one’s location and becomes a member of minority community in an alien land.

In the novels of Bharati Mukherjee all the female protagonists suffer from the politics of ethnicity and identity. In her novels she describes an immigrant woman is at once made conscious of her difference in term of color, race, and gender. A life cycle model of ethnic conflict is also analyze various stages of ethnic conflict with state should be handled on the priority basis. If state fails to resolve conflict the reformation of nationality of a particular ethnic group creates serious unrest and threat to the process of nation building.

Key Words: *Ethnicity, Fragmentation, Marginal, Minority, Reformation.*

Today, Bharati Mukherjee holds not only an enviable position but she is also an authentic voice of the diasporic tradition. She is also conspicuous from her contemporary writers of the diaspora in the sense as she considers it is a gain instead of a loss. She enjoys it by interpreting it as the politics of space. She neither forgets nor glorifies what diaspora literally meant for diaspora writers. Among the fascinating diasporic voices Bharati Mukherjee stands apart by the virtue of representing Immigrant issues. She is an Award Winning Indian born American writer. Bharati Mukherjee, born in a period of transition was a sensitive observant of the socio-political condition.

She is a writer who is at her best when she draws on her experiences of the old world while writing with insight about the New World to which now she belongs. Her most remarkable works reflect not only her pride in her Indian heritage, but also her celebration of embracing America. Her writing has gained significant recognition because she depicts the immigrant experiences, particularly that of the South Asian Diaspora in North America.

In her writings she voices her own experiences to show the changing shape of American society, she describes herself as unhyphenated American and not the hyphenated Indian –American title. In Present era, Global market economy can be seen as a natural derivative of inter-cultural, inter-racial and multicultural relations. Diaspora is one of the most important issues in Postcolonial discourse. These problems of present Diasporas are different from the pre-historic and early periods. Diasporic literature explores the process of migration, accumulation, resistance, adaptation and transformation. It also focuses on the issues of home, belonging, nostalgia and quest of self and cultural identity, transnational and trans-cultural situation. In *Writing Women Across Cultures*, Jasbir Jain says:

“The ‘diaspora’ is in itself a complex term. The scattering like that of the Jews scattering can also grow roots and also bear fruits Expatriate may longingly look back while immigrant relate more positively to the culture of their adoption and seek a meaningful role in its political and cultural life”.

(146)

Hence, diaspora situation presents a double challenge of not only preserving one’s own indigenous culture but also a perfect assimilation or fusion with the other culture so as to avoid loneliness and cultural conflict. In literature Ethnicity works as an identity phenomenon meaning the search for self. It defines the social boundary of ethnic group and develops a strategy of acquiring the resources one needs to survive. The diasporic force which emerges from identity formation becomes ethnicity. The Indian community has become an ethnic group, sharing cultural values, communication and territorial contiguity and is distinguishable from the other groups. (Graves 7)

On the other hand quest for identity is the basic to the human world. With the decline of grandeur and dignity the crisis of human life in the post –world era the crisis has intensified. Men face an unprecedented rootlessness, loneliness and alienation. Their quest and succeeding discoveries. In case of women it is a double quest, the quest for identity as a woman and as a human being. Mukherjee is one of a handful of writers who represents the emerging tradition of Indo-American writing. But she can be placed in the much broader and older tradition of Asian –American literature.

In the beginning of her career Bharati Mukherjee wrote the two novels *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Wife*, both the novels share her own experience of life where the authors seems to cling with her past. The First novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* is known as the autobiography of Bharati Mukherjee which elaborates her childhood memories in Calcutta, her marriage to a foreigner, visiting India after marriage and cultural and social difference between India and America. Here the protagonist Tara becomes the mouthpiece of Bharati Mukherjee who suffers from crisis of identity and ethnicity. Now the question is before her which culture and society she has to adopt? Her novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* the protagonist Tara Banerjee returns to India after seven years stay in America. The story is drawn on Mukherjee’s own experience and those of her sisters who had gone to study in America. When Tara land sat Bombay airport, she is not comfortable with her relatives. Here, Tara’s Bombay relatives cannot accept a woman who not accompanied by her husband, David. According to Indian Tradition, a man should lead the woman. He plays a protective role. Travelling alone, living alone and

moving alone are of unfamiliarity in many parts of India. In Indian tradition, one should marry in his own caste. If anyone marries from another caste, he will be treated as an outsider, outcaste or sinner. M. Sivaramkrishna blames her western education for her feeling of rootlessness and lack of identity:

“Tara in *The Tiger’s Daughter* finds it difficult to relate herself to her family, city culture in general since her marriage to an American, her Western educations are enough signs to brand her as an ‘alienated’ westernized Woman. The implicit logic is that since she is exposed to the West and has absorbed its values, She must be necessarily alienated. Therefore, even when she tries to ‘voice’ her ‘continuing attachment for and identity with India, the voice does not carry conviction for it is at variance with the usual stance – of indifference and arrogance – one is generally associates with the ‘westernized’ (exiled) Indian”. (74)

But the protagonist Tara violating these rules and marries a foreign man who is a Jew. She totally forgets her caste and religion through her marries. Ironically, Mukherjee makes a criticism of the conservative attitude of the Indians who are crazy of foreign things and clothes but they do not reconcile with foreign marriage. In the presence of her family, relatives and friends Tara feels herself alienated. Tara becomes mentally turbulent and makes her return to the USA. Thus, in the first novel one finds the feeling of alienation.

Wife the protagonist Dimple wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. This novel tells the story of Dimple, a seemingly docile young Bengali girl who, as any other normal girl, full of dreams about her married life and so eagerly and impatiently waits for marriage. She marries Amit Basu. She visualizes a new life for herself in America where Amit is expecting to immigrate. She is expected to play the role of an ideal Indian wife, stay at home and keep the house for the husband. Her frustration is built up gradually by the circumstances. She resents being wife in the Basu family and rebels against wifedom in the many ways. One such way is here including a miscarriage by the skipping herself free from her pregnancy, which she views as a Basu’s property even in her womb. But herself identity is avoided by marriage. She aspires for self –recognition and dream fulfillment. But Basu behaves in a different way. He needs her only for sexual harassment. She feels it’s a sort guilty. Finally in her mentally upset state, she kills Amit in an act of self-liberation and eventually commits suicide.

Bharati Mukherjee deals with the different shades of Ethnicity and Identity in *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World*. The novel *Jasmine* is the story of adaptation and not a defeat. It is the story of a Punjabi rural girl, Jyoti. Prakash, an energetic and enthusiastic young man enters in Jyoti’s life as her husband. A woman has to accept the path of her husband, renamed as Jasmine, joyously sharing the ambition of her husband; she looks forward going to America, a land of opportunities even this dream gets shattered by the murder of Prakash on the eve of his departure. She decides to go America and fulfill Prakash mission and perform “Sati”.

Adopting American life style Jasmine grabs every opportunity to become American. Jasmine becomes Jase. At the end she kills Sukhwinder, the Khalsa lion who killed Prakash. After that she goes to Iowa assuming a new name “Jase”. The manifold facts or roles played by Jasmine as Jase and Jase assaults the power in woman. The power can be equal to Sakti which is command over quality that destroys and fights against all evils.

Jasmine has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. She has learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but herself. Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter and adaptor. She figures against unfavorable circumstances, comes out a winner and craves out a new life in an alien country.

The novel *The Holder of the World* re-forces expatriation as a journey of the human mind. Like Jasmine who travels westward, Hannah Easton travels eastward. Hannah is born in Massachusetts who gives her a diamond known as true 'Emperor's Tear'. The story is told the detective's searching for the diamond and Hannah's view point. The physical journey of the female hero leads to probing of the self but also makes her recognize the side of herself. She returns to her native land, not as a reformed American but a rebel living on the fringes of society. *The Holder of the World* talks about the influences of dislocation, cross-cultural confrontation resulting in transformation where two cultures come into contact with each other. Mukherjee has tried her best to explore consequences of cultural confrontation, when the Puritan Seventeenth century and early Eighteenth century American can world meets with its contemporary Mughal Indian world, with the fantastic mingling of history and imagination. According to Sattar:

"The essential discourse of ethnic difference and its correlation with the politics of margin make Mukherjee's narrative of diaspora different from other South-Asian writers of diaspora. She seems hardly interested in assimilation but tends towards dismantling the established boundaries between the third world immigrants and the hegemony of American national Identities. She redefines and reshapes both models of mosaic and melting pot of multiculturalism, where the touch of difference is used to politicize her belonging and un-belonging. The overlap of cultural spaces and crisis-crossing flows, in which there is no centre(Mukherjee) gestures at a real multicultural construction of ethnicity and national identity that is not framed within a mutually exclusive, binary opposition between assimilation within or exclusion from the dominant cultural discourse of identity".(Sattar6)

The novel *Leave it to Me*, Bharati Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby DiMartino, short name Debi who seeks revenge on parents who abandon 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 and at mother-daughter relationships through the political and emotional involvement of the chief character in her quest for revenge.

In *Leave It to Me*, Devi Dee reflects multiple identities. The Protagonist Devi Dee goes through the phenomenon of location, dislocation and relocation. The novel is the description of her efforts which she makes trying to locate and relocate herself with her surroundings. The novel not only reveals the postcolonial complexities of identity – crisis, location, dislocation, and re-location but also proves a document of the writer's autobiographical complexities. In *Leave It to Me*, Mukherjee has employed throughout the novel, a set of metaphors and concepts taken from chaos theory to prove that, and 'destruction is creation's necessary prelude.' Chaos leads to creation. Good and evil are created. Evil due to its deeds leads towards to destruction. After destruction its again vagueness, anarchy and chaos. Within this chaos seeds for further creation are embedded.

Thereafter, chaotic confusion that is anarchy, madness violence is different modes of purification. They symbolize preparatory stage for some sort of creation.

The novel *Desirable Daughters* is a tale of immigrants and the attitude of three sisters and their ways of dealing with situations. *Desirable Daughters* as the title suggests, one kind of the daughters of Motilal Bhattacharya and the great –grand–daughters of Jai Krishna Gangooly, belong to a traditional Bengali Brahmin family. Padma, Parvati and Tara are the symbolic names of Shakti (Goddess of Hindu) do not flaunt the some ethical values but have the grit to niche for them. They are blend of traditional and modern outlook. Padma and Parvati do not regret their choices, the former an immigrant of Bombay with an encourage of servants to catch her. Tara, the narrator of the novel marries Bishwapriya Chatterjee, goes on arranged marriage. Tara sends his son with his father as a divorce settlement follows. Tara works as a volunteer in a pre-school. She enjoys her love life with Andy. The fluidity of her identity, testifies not only his own but also the fluidity of the immigrant. Finally Tara returns to her father’s house for solace. Tara has become the New World woman who is caught in the struggle between her Indian traditions and the modernity to which she is exposed in America.

The novel incorporates the two recent novels of Mukherjee. *The Tree Bride* and *Miss New India* are the squeal of *Desirable Daughters*. The novel, *The Tree Bride* deals with the root-search links the past incidents with the present happenings of Tara’s life of *Desirable Daughters*. *The Tree Bride* presents the rich, sophisticated and cosmopolitan Tara Lata and her unforeseen calamity which pushes her to come back to her home land (India). Like Debby she searches for their historical Indian roots. It narrates how she becomes the tree bride when her bridegroom dies by a snake bite on the of marriage and her father marries her to the Forest God to save her. Tara, the widowed woman becomes social worker. She embraces the poor and homeless and participates in the India’s freedom struggle. She is sentenced to death by the British history. Tara Lata yearns for home and tradition, finds ancestral roots and her place in pre-independent India. She discovers the shameful past whence taboos like child marriage and superstition devastated the dreams and joy of young and innocent girls like Tara Lata.

The eight novels *Miss New India* is the recent novel of Bharati Mukherjee, which again has its protagonist Anjali Bose, who finds herself in a dilemma of choices between ill-fated marriage and a promising career. Encouraged by her teacher, Peter Champion, She takes her destiny in her hands and moves ahead from her gloomy backwater town to the Silicon city of Bangalore. She finds herself in the company of young and highly ambitious youngsters, who speak the American slang to secure call centre jobs and earns a living. Anjali is now a high-tech city girl and has complete freedom. She overcomes her own past and recreates her presents as she wishes. Once again, Bharati Mukherjee records the struggle of Indian girls, this time migrating within India from a small town to a big metropolis. The change of place demands a change of identity which Anjali readily makes and transforms her life.

Through the novel *Miss New India* Mukherjee has shown the status of women in past and present India. Women too accepted the patriarchal society’s dictates because of their fiscal dependence on men that is on father’s husbands and sons in various phases, of their lives. In other words, lack of earning competence crippled

them and made them endure in calm if they were not blessed with fine life. This condition led to never – ending crimes against women and containment of their fundamental privileges. But Anjali engraved her own customs to make her monetarily sovereign. Like the thousands of other young people who congregate to this metropolitan, Anjali longs for a career to make money to uphold her and achieve her thoughts.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee are concerned with the women especially Indian women who are exiles, immigrants or simply migrants. It speaks volumes about their struggles and appeals for a social and cultural reform in the present world, where women are treated like dirt. The quick and widespread popularity of the novelist shows that her voices concern and care have not one unheeded. Mukherjee's protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism sexism, and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation.

Migracy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual is a global and transcultural necessity. In her earlier novels diasporic transmigration meant new opening and emancipation from the clutches of convention bound society. In these novels, attachment to one's own native culture and homeland living abroad was presented as something to be spurned and total assimilation into the host culture was hailed. It creates a location of the presence that reduces the diasporic individual to delink the past and deconstruct the future.

These fictional narratives were written to challenge unsympathetic pre-existing narratives found within the chronicled intertexts. Women narrated stories of women characters allow for a transformation of the women away from an identity created by the moralizing, stereotyped descriptions towards a more fully developed sense of female identity. Traditional writings have another fictional 'identity' through an imagined account by the women themselves deconstructs that limited 'identity' formed through the male 'gaze'. It does so because of the ability of fiction to allow the readers create a fictional world which can be experienced imaginatively and from within their own subjectivity. The journey of Bharati Mukherjee from *The Tiger's Daughter* to *Miss New India* is an exploration of Indian culture and Mythology which tells though Mukherjee is living in America yet her soul is wandering in India in from of her female protagonists. Mukherjee's works focus on the phenomenon of migration, living far away from their native and being discriminated on grounds of race, color or creed and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates as well as on Indian women and their struggle. Her own struggle with identity first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada, and finally as an immigrant in the US has lead to her current contentment of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants.

Mukherjee's heroines left a long lasting influence on readers mind as they finally emerged out to be having impressive marginalized category of the society of the society i.e., the weaker sex. Their encounter with the west strengthens their existence and enhances their personality, in this way they are capable of challenging their subjugation. Female orientations is also reflected in her works as most of the novels have the title based on female protagonist like, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable Daughter* and *The Tree Bride*. Mukherjee and her heroines are identical, with their development she celebrates her assimilation in the

American Society and Mukherjee comes to see herself in her characters, so that we can no longer separate the writer from the writing, tell the dancer from the dance; we can only intuit the nature, of the dancer, by looking at the dance itself. Bharati Mukherjee is deeply connected to Indian Mythology and aesthetics. Her own personality as well as her novels, presents a beautiful blending of “a decidedly Hindu Imagination with an Americanized sense of the craft of fiction”. *Jasmine*, *Leave It to Me*, *Desirable Daughters* and *The Tree Bride* show this cultural synthesis.

. Mukherjee’s depiction of women and their different relationships portrays the dominance of patriarchal practices in traditional society as, well as the forms of liberation and empowerment which are available to women in their diasporic situation. Her female characters are real and modern. They are typical representatives of young woman particularly of The Third World countries who relish the dream of immigrating to America for higher education and higher wages, and then after arrival there, aspire to settle there permanently. Their situations and the difficulties they face are also realistically portrayed. Mukherjee with her time present and time past scheme used the tool of man in a society; thus avoiding the fixation on the static past. At same, the realistic present, sometimes painful, takes the characters easily and constantly rooted in the ongoing process of the past.

So the mode of mythic realism used by Mukherjee seems safe for her to deal Postcolonial complexities in a state of diaspora. It is her strategy of liberation from the stereo-types of orientalism. Her characters like Jasmine, Hannah and Tara Lata Gangooly are the class themselves. Mukherjee’s evolution both as a writer and a person is influenced by the synthesis of myth and realism and this influence is also clearly seen in her style but with each subsequent publication she seems to cool down. That fire has now subsided. As a writer she emerged powerful voice and spokesperson of all immigrants in America with tinge of America style and Indian sensibility.

To conclude we can say that the Protagonists of Mukherjee’s novels leave a long and everlasting impact on the minds of the readers as they finally emerged out to be having an impressive marginalized category of the society known as weaker sex. They encounter on the foreign ground with the western culture and strengthen their existence and enhance their personalities. In this way they are capable of challenging their subjugation. Female inspiration and orientation are visible are visible in Mukherjee’s works as the most of them have the title based on female protagonists like *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, *Desirable* , *The Tree Bride* and *Miss New India*.

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