



The Achievers Journal

Volume 4, Issue 2

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 April-June, 2018

Cross-Cultural Conflict: A Study in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee's Novels

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee is an India-born American Novelist who has highlighted the conflict between the cultures of 'homeland' and 'adopted land'. Bharati Mukherjee as a Novelist and a short story writer deals with the problems of transition which brings the state of displacement, separation, rootlessness, cultural conflict or biculturalism and it cultivates the ocean of diasporic ethos in her works. The characters in her novels and short stories, are harbinger of diasporic consciousness in shape of sufferings, pains, predicaments, loneliness, homelessness and rootlessness. The present paper will delve deep in highlighting such diasporic ethos of cultural conflict of Indian as well as American cultures.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural conflicts; expatriation; immigration; displacement; nostalgia; acculturation; assimilation

Bharati Mukherjee was born on 27 July, 1940 in a Bengali Brahmin family of India and married a Canadian fellow – student, Clark Blaise, the Canadian Novelist, Professor and Journalist at the University of Iowa in 1963. She lived in Canada from 1966 to 1980 and became a naturalized Canadian. There is an 'on-going quest' from 'expatriation to immigration', 'from India to Canada', 'from east to west' in her writings which made her as 'a psychological expatriate'. She feels the sense of "ethnic identity" that she calls it as "to cloak myself in my own Brahminical elegance" (Mukherjee 28) even after her white husband and two assimilated sons, she felt an expatriate and associated herself with V.S Naipaul as 'an expatriate writer'. But, later on, she



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rejected Naipaul as a model and selected Bernard Malamud who was chiefly concerned with the life of minorities and their pains and sufferings. Malamud taught her to work in an entirely different cultural milieu and thus, built another category as “the other” or as “Third World writer”. Such experiences of Mukherjee has cultivated a cross-cultural encounter in her writings which creates a critical attention to her works.

Bharati Mukherjee, was born in Hindu Bengali Brahmin family, finds a different sense of her existence and in the beginning, like Naipaul, she writes “about living in a perpetual exile and the impossibility of ever having a home.” (Mukherjee 28) But she feels,

Like Naipaul, I am a writer from the Third World but unlike him I left India by choice to settle in the U.S. I have adopted this country as my home. (Mukherjee 28)

Her aim as an author is to get her acquainted with “intricate and unknown world comprehensible to mainstream ‘American readers.’”(Mukherjee 28) She proudly feels to call herself as an immigrant American rather than an expatriate Indian. She tells “Language gives me my identity,” and further adds, “I am the writer I am because I write in North American English about immigrant in the New World.”(Hancock 35) Her cultural journey from Calcutta to Canada is not an immigration from east to west but it her move from English world of Jane Austen to the American world of Walt Whitman.

Bharati Mukherjee is more concerned with non-native issues as American critics feel about her writings that she explained to Jerry Pinto:

I am fighting the American establishment to be regarded as central. I want to destroy the whole notion that Asians, or people of different color are ‘sojourners’ where as those who arrived in American from Germany or Sweden are ‘settlers’. (II)

Most of the critics call her as an autobiographical writer. But she intelligently moves from “particular autobiographical concerns” to much larger themes “of multiculturalism/ diversity” which are “key words of being American.”(Pinto II)

Bharati Mukherjee has the soul of India, and while visiting India in 1989, she was sari-clad, dark- eyed, dark haired with a Bengali-Brahmin name yet she called her American mainstream writer. But she is evidently accepted in her adopted country as an Asian American or ‘a woman



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of color' but not as 'a writer of mainstream American woman writing'. Therefore, Malashri Lal aptly comments,

Bharati Mukherjee has deliberately problematized her identity, perhaps over-reacting to the likelihood of being enclosed in a coterie culture geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship. (57-58)

The conflict in the mind of author is evidently reflected in her writings. We can witness the problems of place and displacement, crisis of identity, nostalgia, search for home, divided personality in her works. Therefore, Maya Manju Sharma finds such conflicts as themes in her novels and that of her short stories,

In her fiction, Bharati Mukherjee handles western themes and settings as well as characters who are westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu, and essentially moral. (18)

Her major concern as a novelist and a short story writer has been to depict the life of South-Asian expatriates as well as immigrants in USA and Canada in her works and her characters face the problem of 'acculturation' and 'assimilation' which has created the cross-cultural crisis before them. The expatriate celebrates and dwells upon his status of being 'outsider' or 'ex-status' and looms loneliness, nostalgia, depression and despair. They think of 'past' and love to celebrate 'present', therefore, George Steiner considers the expatriate writer as "the contemporary everyman." (10-11) Christine Gomez explains these writers as a writer of different culture mind-set who make,

A wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral and cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by environment. (72)

Christine Gomez further adds,

The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as a refuse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new country. (72)



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The novelist has built 'a home' in her 'native land' or 'mother land' and is living in her 'imaginary land' or 'the alien land' as 'an indifferent land' which hardly takes care for her emotions and feelings and scarcely shaves her experience of past. There arouses a natural cross-cultural conflicts in her writings.

Bharati Mukherjee who was born in a Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta, lived in London with her parents for three years and came to India in 1951 where she joined Loreto Convent School run by Irish nuns. As a child, she enjoyed the privileged childhood and her family was highly educated and westernized. She took her B.A (Honors) in English at the University of Calcutta in 1959 and M.A. degree in English from University of Baroda in 1961. Her father, Sudhir Lal Mukherjee, believed in his daughter's aptitude and encouraged her to join Creative Writing program in the United States. She also went to the University of Iowa's writer's workshop and obtained an MFA in creative writing in 1963 & a PHD in English and comparative literature in 1969. At the University Iowa in 1963, she met Clark Blaise, a Canadian fellow-student, novelist, professor and journalist and married him in North American style at one lunch hour in September, 1963. She lived in Canada from 1966 to 1980 as a naturalized Canadian and lived in Toronto and Montreal and held the teaching position at McGill University and Concordia University. She migrated to the USA in 1980 with her family and became a USA citizen in 1988. She also taught at Queens College, New York for a brief period before finally joining as a Professor of English at University of California, Berkeley.

Bharati Mukherjee won many awards and scholarships and availed grants from McGill University in 1968 and 1970. She got Canada Arts Council Grant twice in the years 1973-74 and 1977. She was awarded Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute Grant in 1976-77 and Canadian Grant in 1982. She was also awarded with National Book Critics Circle Award for her collection of short stories, *The Middleman and Other stories* in 1989. She wrote five novels- *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993) and *Leave It to Me* (1997) and two collections of short stories- *Darkness* (1985) and *The middleman and other stories* (1988). She wrote together with her husband, Clark Blaise, during their stay with her family in Calcutta, the non-fictional books, *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) and *The Sorrow and the Terror*.

Bharati Mukherjee in the *Tiger's Daughter* (1972) delineates the cultural conflict of *Tara*, the heroine of novel, who belongs to an upper class Brahmin girl of Bengali family and goes to



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America for Higher studies where she marries an American and become a stranger in her own homeland and the alien land. After coming to India, she feels totally confused and lost. She feels the sense of homelessness and rootlessness. She finds herself as an exiled Indian and westernized American. *Wife* (1975) highlights the complex theme of immigrant experience of Dimple who is a middle class Bengali woman and is married to neuro-surgeon for seeking fortune, freedom and perfect happiness in America. Finally, she faces the cross-cultural conflict and murder her husband out of neurosis. She is abnormal woman who leads her life to nowhere land. *Jasmine* (1989) reveals the adventures of cross-cultural reality of Jasmine, the heroine, who undertakes her odyssey of journey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. She is struggling for her search for identity and finds a rootless land where she looms loneliness, depression and despair. Jasmine's 'widowhood and exile' proceeds her journey of life and she emerges as a survivor, a fighter and adaptor. Her cultural transplant leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. *The Holder of the world* (1993) deals with the cultural conflict of two cultures with a tale of dislocation and transformation interacting with each other. It is not a journey from East to West but from West to East in search of art and culture. It is a story of two white women, one living in the 17th century and other becomes obsessed with puritan girl brought up at a Salem in Massachusetts to 'the bibi' of a Hindu King. Being Master narrator of the story, describes it as "uniting people and possessions". Mukherjee had united not only Eastern, Central and Pacific zone but she had united the universal theme of time- the past, present and future. For her, 'History is a big saving bank' (6) and she has beautifully handled and explored "the complexities of cultural confrontation and politics of "otherness" in the Novel. *Leave It to Me* (1977) continuous the theme of immigration in a way which completes her trio logy beginning with Jasmine. The protagonist, Debbie Devi, is a Eurasian orphan who is adopted by a New York family of Italian origin. Born in India with a hippie follower mother of a sex-age guru and her father, the founder of Ashram, a serial Killer of Romeo Hawk/Haque, was adopted by Di Maribino family of America. At the age of twenty three, after graduating from Suny, Albany, she sets out her search for bio-mom in California. As a foundling, she seeks a city, a neighborhood and a home and finally inherits nothing but she is entitled to everything. It is a story of great culture shock of a fomenting full with immense cross-cultural crisis of identity and loneliness but leads to a great universal human appeal as created by the novelist.

After the publication of *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* was published in 1989 with an interval of fourteen years and she devoted to two dozen short stories dealing with the touch of rootless identity. These short stories have been collected in two Volumes- *Darkness*(1985) and *the Middleman*



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and other stories (1988). The novelist perceives migration as 'aloofness of expatriation' (3) and 'exuberance of immigration' (3). She also experienced in Canada as the 'visible minority' and encountered 'the racial discrimination' as a pariah is treated in Indian society. *Darkness* is a collection of twelve short stories which unfolds the fates and sufferings of Indian people in Canada where violence, rape and fear are rampant here and there. Violence is spread like a dispassionate bureaucrat. These stories are centralized around the theme of expatriation and immigration where her characters appear like a split personality or a divided self. Such comments of Leela Lahiri surface in "Hindus" as "I am an American Citizen" (133) or as "I was a Bengali Brahmin" (133) but she feels her 'home' in India. It generates the cross-cultural conflict between Indian ethos and that of American consciousness.

The Middleman and other Stories highlights the dream of America as a symbol of new life where the characters have to pay a heavy price of being American. They belong to the different countries of World like India, China, Italy, Hungary, Iraq, Trinidad, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Germany, Philippines, Vietnam and Afghanistan. In such stories, protagonist are generally women characters who are inclined to have a sexual relationship which results in the sexual misadventure. In these stories, sex is a bond of love which proves to be an ephemeral bond. The novelist consider herself as a middleman or an interpreter between two cultures where immigrants of Third World are in a process of 'uprooting' and 're-rooting' that Clark Blaise in his book, *Resident Alien*, calls "unhousement" and "rehousement" (648). In brief, it concentrates on cross cultural-conflict between two cultures, which are essentially Indian and American. Her non-fictional work *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977) is based on the memories of their year-long stay with Mukherjee's Family in Calcutta and *The Sorrow and Terrors: The Haunting legacy of Air India Tragedy* (1987) is based on a plane crash in route Canada, which exploded over the sea off the West Coast of Ireland. Mukherjee is perspective of effects of the disasters on relatives of victims in Canada which knits the stories of isolation, depression and pain.

The present paper ventures to highlights the cross-cultural conflict as a major theme in the novels and other writings of Bharati Mukherjee. It will also reveal the consequences of expatriation to immigration which will lend to the sense of loneliness, homelessness and rootlessness as an ethos of quest for past, nostalgia, context of life, despair and depression of character in her works which establishes her as a post-colonial novelist.



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