

## DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND IMMIGRANT IDENTITY IN BHARATI

### MUKHERJEE'S *JASMINE* AND *DESIRABLE DAUGHTERS*

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#### ABSTRACT

Migrations have both erased and re-inscribed patterns of being and belonging, producing a self with multiple and partial identification which is simultaneously both individualized and community oriented. Bharathi Mukherjee's female protagonists are immigrants and suffer cultural shock but they are potential women and are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic journeys. Suddenly Prakash is murdered and Jasmine emigrates to America all alone to fulfill his dreams. Tara's boyfriend Andy warns her about the consequences of investigating the past, as it has the power to dominate one's entire present. Nevertheless Tara proceeds with her quest and as the mystery unfolds Tara is forced to face her family, her past and a culture that she has distanced herself from, resulting in a conflict between old modes of thinking and new forms of consciousness that have been created. Finally they become capable of living in a world where individuals exist not as a unified One, but as many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities.

**KEYWORDS:** Cultural Conflict, Diasporic Consciousness, Trauma of the Protagonist, Immigrants, Portraying the Humiliation, Cultural Identity, Hybridity

#### INTRODUCTION

Migrations have both erased and re-inscribed patterns of being and belonging, producing a self with multiple and partial identification which is simultaneously both individualized and community oriented. Thus the diasporic writer occupies a space of exile and cultural solitude which can be called a hybrid location of antagonism, perpetual tension and pregnant chaos. Here the reality of the body, a material production of one local culture, and the abstraction of the mind, a cultural sub-text of a global experience, provide the intertwining threads of the diasporic existence of a writer.

In fact writing allows individuals to regain control over the self, the world and their own life story narrative. It provides a unique safe space in which new identities can be created and linguistic transitions accomplished. Therefore the writer begins by mapping the contours of their own transited identity that are in constant negotiation and transformation because of the interaction between the past and the present.

The Indian born writer Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. The immigrant writers in America can be divided into two categories. Firstly, the "Willing Immigrant Writers" who settled in America from Europe and Asia and who have made it their home. The second category consists of the "Unwilling Immigrant Writers" with American origin whose forefathers were brought to America in some slave trips. But Bharati Mukherjee considers herself different from other European writers for a variety of reasons. Bharathi Mukherjee's female protagonists are immigrants and suffer cultural shock but they are potential women and are anxious to establish their identity by undertaking their heroic journeys. That is why; Bharathi Mukherjee has received considerable critical attention

from almost all the quarters of the globe in a relatively short period of just twenty five years. Even though she has been acknowledged as a „voice of expatriate-immigrants“ sensibility, a close observation of her novels reveals that she has written all the novels with predominantly feminist views.

Since Bharathi Mukherjee’s women characters are the victims of immigration, all the critics focus her novels as problems and consequences due to immigration but actually the problems are not because they are immigrants but because the women characters fight for their rights as a woman and then as an individual. Bharathi Mukherjee has tried to create a new relationship between man and woman based on **equality, non-oppression, non-exploitation so that the creative potentials of both are maximized as individuals and** not gender dichotomies. The male, as a representative of the patriarchal society has, at last, being jerked off the center of woman’s gravitation. The woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force, beyond the fullness of patriarchy. *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972) and *Wife* (1975) relate the dilemma of belongingness as a matter of flux and agony and explore the problems of nationality, location, identity while *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* (2002) reflect the “cultural diaspora-isation” what Stuart Mall calls marks the beginning of the desire for the survival in the community of adoption. She rejects the nostalgia of her early books and the myth of the nomad 'adrift', in favour of an affirmation of belonging and the theme of the successful 'conquest' of the New World.

This metastasis is also seen in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, who is one of the most celebrated writers of the Asian immigrant experience in America. Her writings are largely honed by the multiple dislocations of her personal biography, which itself has been described as a text in a kind of perennial immigration. Lying at the heart of Mukherjee’s cultural poetics is her espousal of the immigrant aesthetics, integral to which is a rejection of fixed conceptions of national cultural identity.

To elucidate her view point, Mukherjee describes her narratives as “stories of broken identities and discarded languages”, that nevertheless, represent her characters as fired by the “will to bond to a new community” (introduction *Darkness*). Discarding nostalgia, they are willing to be changed and open to the act of transformation, adopting new possibilities as offered by the narrative of assimilation. Thus we see her protagonist Jasmine, boldly asserting : “I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet-proof vest, was to be a coward”.(*Jasmine* 185 )

The story of Jasmine, protagonist of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel of the same name begins as Joyti, in a small village of Hasnapur in Punjab. She is renamed Jasmine after her marriage to Prakash Vihh. Prakash wants her to become a modern city woman and as he aids her in her transformation from ‘ Jyoti ’ to ‘ Jasmine ’ she both perceives herself as, and eventually becomes the figure that Prakash desires to create. Here Mukherjee is depicting identity formation as a complex process that is dependent not solely upon the agency of the individual, but also upon the surrounding environment. Her renaming is a sign of her initial migration away from traditional India. Jyoti and Jasmine are two separate selves, yet Jasmine finds herself occupying both identities.

Suddenly Prakash is murdered and Jasmine emigrates to America all alone to fulfill his dreams. Upon her arrival in Florida, she meets Half-Face, the captain of the ship on which she entered the country, and his disrespectful treatment gives her, her first taste of American racial categorization. Half-Face sees her only as a sexual being and after the rape Jasmine finds that she cannot escape this new perception of her identity. Thus she turns to violence in order to express the conflict she is experiencing. She stabs Half-Face to death and in this act she finds the strength to continue living and vows

to start a new life in America, separate from India and the naive identity of her past. Hence Jasmine's identity is formed not through construction alone, but also by the destruction of her existing self.

Jasmine then meets Lillian Gordon, staying with whom begins her process of assimilation by learning how to become American. Lillian bestows upon her the nickname 'Jazzy', a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture which she welcomes gladly. After that she moves in with a traditional Indian family in Hushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the inertia of this home for it was completely isolated from everything American. Considering it to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, she tries to separate herself from all that is Indian and forget her past completely.

She proceeds with her migratory pattern and moves to New York City, to become the au pair for an American family. With Taylor, his wife Wylie and their daughter Duff, she creates yet another identity upon a new perception of herself. But though Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased. They emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension, thereby causing Jasmine to create another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before. While living with the Hayes, Jasmine begins to master the English language, empowering herself to further appropriate American culture.

Taylor begins to call her 'Jase' suggesting that again she does not have an agency in the creation of her new self since Taylor constructs it for her. Also, for the first time in the Hayes household, Jasmine becomes aware of her racial identity because Taylor and his friends understood that she was from South Asia and tried to associate her with that community. Taylor's friends essentialize Jasmine, falling prey to the Orientalist habit of assuming knowledge of the other and expecting an essence from her because of her background. Thus she is discriminated against but on a much subtler level, as her racial identity is now subject to the prejudice of incorrect distinction.

Before long Taylor gets romantically involved with Jasmine and embraces her different ethnicity without orientaling her into an exotic fantasy. Jasmine transforms but this time the change is not from a reaction, but rather from her very own yearning for personal change. In becoming Jase, Jasmine gets increasingly comfortable with her sexuality which she always tried to repress earlier, more so, after her traumatic experience. But the relationship between Taylor and Jasmine ends abruptly when the past creeps upon her once again manifested in the form of Sukhwinder, the murderer of her husband. The inescapability of memory, and the boundless nature of time and space is stressed once again and Jasmine finds her life distorted by the different consciousness through which she now experiences the world. She loses even her sense of self expression. Unable to live with this plethora of conflicting identities she flees to Baden County, Iowa to give her life a new beginning.

In Baden she meets Bud Wipplemeyer, an American banker who instantly falls in love with her. They eventually marry and Bud renames Jasmine 'Jane' yet another sign of her evolution. Bud encourages Jasmine to freely change roles from caregiver to temptress whenever she feels the desire to and views her sexuality through the lenses of his own oriental fantasy. This instead of denigrating Jasmine, serves to imbue her with a sexual confidence and she thrives on it. Her racial identity also morphs in Baden, for here her difference is recognized but not comprehended or openly acknowledged. The community attempts to see her as familiar instead of alien. This new perception of her race is an essential portion of her identity as Jane because now she feels assimilated and in fact becomes the typical American she always wanted to be.

The end of the novel finds Jasmine moving to California with Taylor, uncertain of what the future will bring but nevertheless confident in her decision to leave. This sense of movement further reinforces the notion that her identity is forever evolving, she cannot remain in a stable life because disruption and change are the means of her survival. The surrounding environments influence her formation of her identities and she navigates between temporal and spatial locations, her perception of herself changes, thereby resulting in a multiplicity of consciousness. These create a tension within her and she feels the need to reconcile these conflicting perceptions so that they do not wage a psychological war inside her. Thereby we see her reinvent her identity completely.

In Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*, the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Tara is a savvy, cosmopolitan world-traveler having beauty, brain, wealth and a privileged life as the wife of a Silicon valley magnate. She emigrates after marrying Bishwapriya Chatterjee, and arrives in America steeped in Indian culture exhibiting the behaviour of the paradigmatic Indian wife. Back at home, she had led a sheltered life where she was inundated with culture, tradition and values though inculcated with education by the Catholic nuns. Thus when Tara reaches America she feels the tug between tradition and freedom as she tries to meet expectations that are often wildly contradictory. But then she immediately tries to embrace American culture taking advantage of the opportunities it affords and attempts to assimilate as best as she can to the new society. Yet how much ever she ventures to blend in with the cosmopolitan population of San Francisco she is constantly aware of being different. She finds it impossible to convey to American friends -- citizens of comparatively classless, mobile society how circumscribed and static Indian identity is :

“[It] is as fixed as any specimen in a lepidopterist's glass case, confidently labelled by father's religion (Hindu), caste (Brahmin), sub-caste (Kulin), mother-tongue (Bengali), place of birth (Calcutta)...” ( *Desirable Daughters* 78 ). It goes on and on in ever decreasing circles. Although Tara and Bish had left Calcutta decades ago, she is always on the alert decoding names, manners and accents whenever she encounters strangers of Indian descent. But Tara's frustration at her endeavours to assimilate and Bish's lack of it eventually leads to a divorce. It marks her transition into a new identity and a liberated self. She soon recognizes that her sexuality is also an aspect of her identity, which she can possess and embrace, after being accosted by the same men who had been respectful towards her during her marriage. She realizes the sexual double standard, the unfair distinction between male and female sexuality in the Indian culture. Yet her life remains surrounded by her ex-husband Bishwapriya Chatterjee, her son Rabi, and her lover Andy Karolyi, a Hungarian Buddhist. It is only with Andy that her perceptions of sexuality get altered as for the first time she becomes selfish, intimate and involved in a relationship without any expectations. She creates a new sexual identity that does not come in conflict with her previous self perceptions. They merely get replaced by the new and different perceptions. In parallel projection are the two men in her life who symbolize two diverse cultures and her cultural dilemma.

Initially she tries to seek solace by clinging on to the past through people, memories, visits or calls and by bonding with her two elder sisters, Parvati and Padma, who serve as links to a past that Tara has begun to forget. But the appearance of the mysterious Chris Dey exposes the shallow intercontinental relationship of the three sisters. He acts as both Tara's catharsis and nemesis. Finally Tara is shaken out of her complacency, her emotional paralysis shattered, as her family is stalked by menace.

Tara's boyfriend Andy warns her about the consequences of investigating the past, as it has the power to dominate one's entire present. Nevertheless Tara proceeds with her quest and as the mystery unfolds Tara is forced to face her

family, her past and a culture that she has distanced herself from, resulting in a conflict between old modes of thinking and new forms of consciousness that have been created. When her house is firebombed she is completely exhausted making her yearning for homeland and traditional life more acute. A trip back to India rekindles a desire to find her family's ancestral roots and their place in the history of pre-independent India. Hence we find Tara Chatterjee trying to discover herself and how she fits into her place in the universe. While she is struggling with the thought of getting back to her ex-husband and being pregnant with his child, she tries to understand her heritage and the actions of her ancestors which may and may not have contributed to the sum total of the person she has evolved into.

This urge to reclaim antiquity is not simply archeological, as it renews the past, refiguring it as contingent, in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The outcome of this interaction between past and present, this reworking, is the production of cultural identities that are in transition and in negotiation and transformation. To extend the explanation, writers situate their work in the past, a space other than presently lived in, not as an act of nostalgia alone, but of anamnesis, a process of fabulation in which a past time or place is not so much recovered or even discovered, but brought into being, invented, made and unmade so that it helps to understand the concept of home as a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination.

Tara after time travelling finds that she is comprised of multiple selves accepting or rejecting certain aspects of both Indian and American culture. She comes to terms with the idea that she never will have a single identity but rather be dispersed between being Indian and American. She does not fight with her multiplicity but rather accepts it as part of her progressive capacity. The Sanskrit poem in the novel's foreword itself lays out Tara's mission :

“No one behind, no one ahead. The path the ancients cleared has closed. And the other path, everyone's path, easy and wide, goes nowhere. I am alone and find my way. ” It suggests a space of liminality and also portrays identity as a continuous journey rather than a fixed construction. Unlike Jasmine, in Tara there is no struggle between the emerging selves that caused Jasmine to remain always on the move and invent completely new identities. Instead Tara's multiplicity evolves in a continuous process that she welcomes. She recognizes that living in the past, whether temporally, spatially or both, is dangerous to the development of one's identity. She keeps on changing and evolving but at the same time does not lose the identities she had once possessed. Instead of transplanting Indian culture or disposing it off altogether she tries to assimilate her Indianness through reinventing her identity as experiences forever keep on moulding it into something new.

The characters in Mukherjee's novel develop multiple consciousness, resulting in a self that is neither unified nor hybrid, but rather fragmented. As the protagonists perceive both their race and sexuality through new and different lenses throughout the course of the text, they come to realize that the notion of a singular identity is a fallacy and the reality of the diasporic experience is the indeterminacy of multiplicity. This multiplicity at times becomes a significant plight for the characters, for as their different consciousnesses contradict each other the characters are left uncertain as to the nature of their identities, not knowing where they fit in the American society. Finally they become capable of living in a world where individuals exist not as a unified One, but as Many, bound by no borders and infinite in the possibility of inventing identities.

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