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PREDICAMENT OF IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

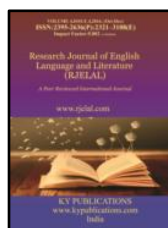
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ABSTRACT

Bharati Mukherjee, the matriarch of Indian diasporic literature, has portrayed Indian immigrant women's challenging experiences in a transnational, cross cultural milieu. The traumas and agonies faced by immigrant women and the unresolved dilemma of immigration occupy top priority in her novels. Through her first hand experience of exile, expatriation and immigration, she has captured the excitement as well as traumas of adjusting to a new world faced by her protagonists. In majority of her novels, she has portrayed female protagonists who face the dilemma of being trapped in their own psychological trap of dual identity. 'Am I Indian or American?' is the echo heard from these characters.

Present study makes a modest attempt to compare Mukherjee's dynamic immigrant aesthetic in selected novels. It chronicles the destinies of a daughter (*The Tiger's Daughter*), a wife (*Wife*) and a widow (*Jasmine*) in cross cultural context. Although these novels expose the confrontation of different cultural codes and the typical alienation and acculturation faced by the protagonists, the resultant effect on them varies owing to their own personal circumstances. Mukherjee has brought to the forefront the hybrid identities acquired by her protagonists on one hand and the rich cultural and religious Indian traditions shaping their Indian identities on the other.

Keywords: Culture, Identity, Immigrant women, Dilemma

INTRODUCTION

Bharati Mukherjee, a widely known diasporic literary celebrity, has captured different shades of the entity called immigration in her novels. Her top agenda in almost all her novels is expatriatehood leading to new identities and related paraphernalia. Her debut novel *The Tiger's Daughter* introduces us to the fragile self and in-betweenness of a daughter, Tara belonging to a wealthy Bengali family. After spending good seven years abroad, she finds Calcutta vastly different than what was in her

childhood memories whereas *Wife*, her second novel looks at a strange aspect of wifehood in an alien milieu. *Wife* is a saga of a wife named Dimple, a day dreamer who ruthlessly kills her husband owing to her inability to adopt to the host culture of the US. The third novel under consideration is *Jasmine* wherein Mukherjee celebrates exuberance of immigration. *Jasmine* chronicles the protagonist's journey of self transformation through freedom, boundless possibilities and opportunities availed by migration to the US.

The women portrayed by Mukherjee are autobiographical projections of her own personality facing the dilemma of transition. Most of the protagonists in the novels follow the same path: travelling abroad, feeling alienated in the Western world, acquiring the foreign culture; to find out finally that they actually do not belong to either Western or Eastern world. Their hybrid dual identity is the result of this process. Tara, Dimple and Jasmine are the stereotyped protagonists who are sandwiched between two identities and it seems as if there is no way out. Although their dilemma show concerns of belongingness, their destinies are different. The three heroines emerge out as different syndromes of immigration: Tara, a split-up person; Dimple, the wife as a psychic murderer and; Jasmine as a pursuant of her American dream. Interestingly enough Mukherjee also highlights Indian aspect of their lives in the three novels. In one of her interviews, Bharati Mukherjee tells about the identity of her characters: "I'm different from other diasporicindian writers in that I'm not concentrating exclusively on nostalgia, but I'm writing about people who are in between and who are deforming their pasts and reforming their identities".

THE TIGER'S DAUGHTER

The Tiger's Daughter expresses biculturalism and explores the post colonial dilemma of an English educated elite expatriate, Tara, on her return visit to India. She 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, the protagonist, was born in Calcutta, schooled in the States and married to an American gentleman. After spending seven years abroad, 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 Tara seeks to reconcile the old world—that of her father, the Bengal Tiger—with

the new one of her husband, David. Mukherjee has sketched an Indian society from the perspective of Tara.

Nostalgic and homesick Tara returns to India, the homeland, to relieve her intensified feelings and memories of it, to reunite with her family, to ward off 'despair' and 'homesickness' (13) of her expatriation in America. But Tara Banerjee-Cartwright is now outcaste in her Bengali Brahmin society because of her "Mleccha" husband. She becomes stranger and alien to her friends, relatives and even to her own parents as they are stranger and alien to Tara. When Tara visits India after seven years, she fails to bring back her old sense of perception and views India with a keenness of a foreigner. She is now totally Americanized. In India, she finds herself a total stranger in the inherited milieu. She experiences a cultural shock. She feels herself a misfit at her home and among friends. Tara finds in India nothing to her liking and she realizes that there is no escape from Calcutta.

ShobaShinde has rightly observed, "An immigrant away from home idealises his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it" (58) and Tara does the same in America. She finds she is no more at home than she was in New York. Who am I? American or Indian? Or both? She constantly argues with herself. Tara remembers how she "had shaken out all her silk scarves ... hung them to make the apartment more 'Indian' ... burned incense sent from India" (34). It shows that she is rootless, so tries to keep her Indianness. It is an attempt, initial, of expatriate who does not like to assimilate in alien culture. Ethnic and national identity is carried and continued in adopted country. Tara swings between the two identities, does not remain stable either at the one or the other, it is her split personality, double consciousness. She is not able to decide herself whether she is Bengali-Brahmin-Indian or American-Christian-White/Brown. At the Bombay airport she responds to her relatives in a cold and dispassionate manner. When her relatives call her "TulTul" it sounds strange to her Americanised ears. The railway station looks like a hospital with so many sick and deformed men sitting on the bundles and trunks. In the compartment she finds it difficult to travel with a Marwari and a Nepali. Now she

considers America a dreamland. When surrounded by her relatives and vendors at the Howrah railway station, Tara feels uncomfortable. It is likely that she has started hating everyone and everything in India where she was born, brought up and taught many values.

The last part of the novel deals with Tara's visit to Darjeeling and her coming back to Calcutta with the sense of boredom and alienation and her final victimization in a mob. Unable to reconcile with these things, Tara feels like going back to America. But to entertain her, her friends arrange a trip to Darjeeling to spend her summer. But Tara gets consolation and peace nowhere. She becomes upset when a heart specialist passes sarcastic remarks on her: "I think your years abroad have robbed you of your feminine propriety" (187). At Nayapur, when she happens to meet one Marwari named Tuntunwala, it leads to her rape by this wicked man. But Tara hides this incident of seduction from others for fear of disgrace.

When everything becomes frustrating and horrible to Tara, she finally decides to go back to America. While returning home, after booking a flight ticket to New York, Tara becomes a victim of violence, caused by the violent agitators. The irony of the novel is that Tara who survived racial hardships in a foreign country comes to her native soil seeking peace is at last killed in her native land. Her desire to find a place of love and security ends in frustration of death.

WIFE

Wife (1975), as the name suggests, is a saga of a wife named Dimple who wishes to steer away from the traditional role of a wife. In the dark mood of bitterness against the plight of Indian women and Canada's racial discrimination, expatriate Bharati Mukherjee composed *Wife*. This novel exhibits the darker side of the split personality of the central character. She fantasizes about marriage; her perception of marriage originating from Indian films and magazines. She marries after many dreams but develops a passive resistance towards her married life. When her husband immigrates to America in search of prosperity, she fails to absorb into the American culture. When it comes to immigrate to America, she does not want to carry her past with

her. She forcefully induces miscarriage by skipping rope. Unable to adopt the American culture, she is a marginalized figure, in terms of her Indian as well as American context. She assassinates her husband and finally commits suicide.

For Dimple, it is a constant fight within the bonded and enchained Dimple who wants freedom and love. Brought up in an upper class middle class conservative environment, she leads a protected life throughout and as expected from a girl of Hindu traditional family. She is shy, docile and submissive. 'The agency for freedom is after marriage' Is imbibed in her psyche. So she starts awaiting marriage with all her fantasies fed by magazines and films. "Marriage would bring her freedom...Marriage would bring her love." (3). Even after her marriage Dimple is not satisfied with her married life. She starts hating everything: "She hated the grey cotton with red roses inside yellow circles that her mother-in-law had hung on sagging tapes against the metal bars of the windows" (20). Dimple thinks that marriage had robbed her off all romantic yearnings so tastefully nourished. Amit is not the man she desired as her husband. Now she is waiting for migration which will bring her freedom and for this she aborts her baby. This act of killing is a manifestation of violence inside her. Dimple wants to migrate but she "does not want to carry any relics from her old life" (42). She thinks that old things will remind her of irritations.

Dimple follows Amit, like Seeta followed Lord Rama. Dimple finds herself further removed, now in an even more unfamiliar society when they immigrate to America. She sees in those Indians who surround her further reflections of what she should and should not be. MeenaSen represents the ideal Indian woman, perpetually satisfied with her position and her identity as a wife and mother. Ina Mullick represents the opposite extreme, an emboldened pants-wearing woman who is determined to live freely and to also free Dimple. Dimple sees in herself neither of the individuals. In her dreamland, Dimple experiences both Indian and American culture. In the beginning she could not digest the culture of the United States because of her deep-rooted Indianness. She has to make several adaptations to fit into the new environment.

All her sincere efforts to fit into the alien culture failed miserably. So she remains isolated and rootless in her dreamland. Amit does not get job initially and according to Dimple "A man without a job was not a man at all." (178). Somehow Amit gets a job and they move to Marsha's flat, at Greenwich. Dimple always dreamt of a fully furnished apartment with all sorts of appliances. Marsha's flat is like a dream come true for her.

However, because of Amit's professional pre-occupation, Dimple's whole world is limited to the four walls of the apartment and media becomes her only friend. Amit suggests that Dimple should go out and make friends but Dimple is fast losing her hold on her sense of reality. Dimple's self is disintegrating as the margins between reality and dream gets blurred within her psyche. Staying home, she is isolated and grows more and more depressed. She is detached and begins to confuse her reality with television. She reacts to others passively, never actively engaging in socializing or housework. She sleeps nearly all day, cooks when necessary, and increasingly watches television and reads magazines while her husband repeatedly inquires what she does all day. Amit begins to become of a caricature: at one time he is even imagined as a profile in a whiskey ad; he is in many ways cast as the one-dimensional character of the matrimonial ad. Dimple even has a brief affair with the American Milt Glasser, from which she is equally detached. It is as if the sexual act occurred in a surreal dream world like television. Dimple seems at all times absent, but there is violence beneath her passive exterior.

Dimple thinks Television set as her only friend and all her cosmos that provides her everything and asks nothing from her in return. Through this media, she is introduced to violence. Added to this she hears more about murder. There were frequent announcements of murders in newspapers, radio and in casual conversations. Dimple's mind is fully occupied with the films and programs that she sees on Television. She loses touch with reality. She is not able to distinguish between what she sees on the TV and the real life. The murders and death on TV become "the voice of madness" (176). One night, after watching TV

programme, Dimple took Amit to the kitchen. Disillusioned, disoriented and unable to grapple with the conflict, she turns into a psychopath and stabs Amit seven times thus setting her free from him for the so called 'Saat Janam' concept which is contradictory to a married woman's values in India. She kills Amit to feel very American almost like a character in a T. V. serial. She is, thus, a mixture of two identities –a Bengali wife and an expatriate Indian wife in America.

JASMINE

The story of *Jasmine* begins with a typical village background with an astrologer under a banyan tree predicting widowhood and exile of Jasmine in soon coming days. Despite living in a traditional orthodox village, as a girl of modern ideas and opinions, she neglects the prediction. She emerges as a rebel against the conventional set up of the traditional, feudal society and her fate as well as the path drawn for her. Jasmine denies the prophecies of the astrologer in the harshest terms:

"You are a crazy old man. You don't know what my future holds!" (1)

Irritated by this, the astrologer hits her leaving a scar on her forehead. She considers the wound to be her third eye. This dowryless and undesirable woman strongly refuses her marriage with a widower selected by her grandmother. She marries a modern man, Prakash Vih. Christened 'Jasmine' (the flower spreading fragrance) by her husband, she acquires a new identity and a new modern life. She becomes a true Indian wife after her marriage with Prakash; identifying her husband's wishes with those of hers. Prakash, in turn, implants his big American dream into his wife. She starts dreaming of a better future in America with her husband. Unfortunately, her dreams are shattered by sudden death of her husband at the hands of the Sikh extremist named Sukhwinder one day before his departure.

Benumbed with grief, Jasmine resolves to complete Prakash's mission and thus avenge his death. Heart-broken Jasmine plans to visit the institution where Prakash had planned to study and burn herself as a belated sati. With the help of her brothers, she makes arrangements to move to America illegally. Jasmine's blooming had started right after her marriage although her visit to

America actually paves a way for dissemination of her fragrance throughout America that changes her life entirely.

Unfortunately, her American odyssey begins on a jarring note. She is brutally raped by Captain Half-face, in whose ship she is smuggled into America. He not only rapes her but makes fun of her husband and humiliates her for her Indian origin. Instead of killing herself, she decides to kill her attacker. She realizes "I could not let my personal dishonour disrupt my mission." She extends her tongue and slices it. Thus, Jasmine transforms herself into Goddess Kali ready to destroy the devil. She knifes her molester to death, stamps upon him till his villainous blood splatters the walls and he huddles lifeless at her feet. After the incident, she burns out the suitcase to relieve herself from tension and also to murder her past. She is reborn again not after her death but after murder of the evil incarnate. Jasmine realizes that surviving and living on can be weapons used to resist physical abuse. She abandons her mission of coming to America and begins a new journey for herself, to create a better tomorrow.

Exasperated and Shattered Jasmine is rescued from the starvation and misery by sympathetic, generous Quaker lady named Lillian Gordon who provides her with shelter, her daughter's clothes and a new name—Jazzy, her first American identity. Thus, Jasmine's assimilation into America is initiated by Lillian. She teaches and shows her how to "talk and walk like Americans" (134-135). Having spent a few days while her tongue heals, Jasmine decides to go to Flushing, New York to meet Professor Devinder Vadhera, her late husband's professor. Vadhera's never try to come out of their four walls. Though away from India, they maintain Indianness artificially. Jasmine stays there for five months, feels claustrophobic in this household because the Punjabi atmosphere in that house reminds her of her Indian origin and her past life and decides to move away. With the help of Lillian Gordon's daughter Kate, she secures a job as a baby sitter at Physics Professor Taylor and Wylie Hayes's house. She is called Jase by Taylor.

"Taylor called me Jase...I like the name given to me, Jase. Jase was the woman who bought

herself spangled heels and silk chartreuse pants." (176)

Once again, Jasmine accepts her new name as well as her new role as a caregiver to Taylor's daughter, Duff. This is one of the best periods of Jasmine's life. Jasmine bloomed from a diffident alien with forged documents into adventurous Jase. In fact, her real transformation begins at Taylor's house—she develops intimacy with Taylor and feels very homely there. Though Taylor is married Jasmine loves him. Taylor also starts loving her and she too wishes to stay there forever. Living with the Hayes family, she becomes more American as she begins to master English and grows more and more aware of American culture.

She appreciates Taylor's family for their sense of respect towards her and she is impressed by the "professor who served her biscuits, smiled at her, and admitted her to the broad democracy of his joking." (167). But just when she has begun to live life happily, she spots Sukhwinder, murderer of her husband and she flees to Iowa to protect her beloved in New York. She is running away for life, not escaping from life, which is definitely a positive step.

Jasmine's life episode in Iowa initiates with her encounter with Mother Ripplmayer, another benefactor. She promises to find Jasmine a job in her son's bank. In Baden, Jasmine not only gets the job in the bank but she makes a place in the heart of the banker, Bud Ripplmayer. In her new role as Bud's lover Jasmine is renamed as Jane. When Jasmine meets Bud, he is "a tall, fit, fifty year old banker, husband of Karin, father of Budddy and Vern", (14). Six months later, Jasmine starts cohabiting with Bud as his unmarried wife. Violence follows Jane yet again. Bud is shot at and is confined to a wheel chair. Jane-Jasmine considers it her duty to take over duties of a wife. Trying to make him comfortable and confident, she becomes pregnant. However, the prospect of unwed pregnancy or motherhood does not disturb her. In the least, Bud proposes her but Jasmine is in no hurry to grab this proposal of marriage. They form a patchwork family with Du, their adopted son who is a Vietnamese brought from a refugee camp. Jasmine is aware that Bud loves her: "Bud courts me because I am alien. I

am darkness, mystery, inscrutability. The east plugs me into instant vitality and wisdom.” (200)

She considers herself as a catalyst and not the reason for the divorce of Bud and Karin. She makes Karin understand that she is not her enemy and that she too is concerned about Bud's happiness as Karin is. Jasmine is very well aware that Karin would be a more suitable caregiver. Du, her adopted son, decides to leave the house and join his sister. Jasmine is greatly disturbed by this and is conscious of its impact on Bud. She starts comparing her life in Hasnapur and Iowa and discovers that there are many similarities. To her, Iowa symbolises a step back into an unbearable past. Predictably, Jasmine begins to feel constrained at the thought of spending her whole life in such a small town. At this point of her stagnant life, suddenly she gets a letter from Taylor informing her that he would shortly come to take her with him. It is a welcome surprise for her.

Arrival of Taylor puts Jasmine in a dilemma. She expresses her dilemma: “I am caught between America and the old world dutifullness.” (240). Taylor convinces her that there would be nothing wrong in leaving Bud. Thus, Taylor sets forth the path for her new adventure in America. Finally, rising above her dilemma and her indecisiveness, she takes a conscious decision of going with Taylor to California, where the promise of America is eagerly awaiting her, “Greedy with wants and reckless from hopes.” (241)

Indeed, Jasmine is a rebellion and revolutionary Indian widow. At every stage of her trouble-torn life, in all her identities—from Jyoti to Jasmine, to Jase and to Jane—coupled with changes in geographical contours—from Hasnapur to Jullundhar, to Florida, Manhattan, Iowa—she seems to act boldly and unhesitantly, thrilled at the prospect of ‘adventure, risk and transformation’ (241). She reveals the climbing and enchanting nature of Jasmine plant. Throughout her life, she clings to her climbing nature under diverse circumstances. All her names maintain a constant initial letter ‘J’ representing the unit of energy ‘joule’. She generates energy through her climbing nature in her passage through a series of catastrophies. Her energy is used to uproot herself

from place to place and even to choose the routes in ‘the tug of opposing forces’ (157).

Conclusion

The novels present three entirely different scenarios of double consciousness of the protagonists, acquired as a result of clash of cultures. *The Tiger's daughter* presents Tara Banerjee as the protagonist who realizes after her short stay in India that she is uprooted from her homeland and her life in alien country is much more desirable than in India. However, more importantly she also realizes that she can neither be called an Indian nor American, giving rise to her split identity. On the other hand, Dimple in *Wife* turns into a psychopath after her assimilation into an alien land. She is neither a Bengali wife—as was expected of her, nor a modern American woman. Jasmine, an Indian widow, on the contrary to these two, is an epitome of endless possibilities celebrating America. She exudes with effervescent energy that is comparable to none.

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