

## Review

## The theme of “alienation” and “assimilation” in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri: A socio – literary perspective

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Words like “Expatriate” and “Diaspora” need no introduction in postcolonial literary scenario. Indian - iaspora, today, has emerged with the “multiplicity of histories, variety of culture, tradition, and a deep instinct for survival.” Indian Diaspora, though counting more than 20 million members world-wide, survives in between “home of origin” and “world of adoption.” The process of survival of the diasporic individual/ community in between the “home of origin” and “world of adoption” is the voyage undertaken in the whole process from “alienation” to final “assimilation.” Bharati Mukherjee as well as Jhumpa Lahiri, an Indian born Canadian/American novelist, has made a deep impression on the literary canvass. Their novels honestly depict the issues of their own cultural location in West Bengal in India. They were displaced (alienation) from their land of origin to USA where they were “simultaneously invisible” as writers and “overexposed” as a racial minority and their final re-location (assimilation) to USA as naturalized citizens. They are the writers of *The Tiger’s Daughter*, *Wife and The Namesake*. The dilemma of belongingness in these three novels is a matter of flux and agony, Which explores the problem of nationality location, identity and historical memory in USA. The “cultural diaspora-isation” which Stuart Mall calls it marks the beginning of the desire for the survival in the community of adoption. The paper aims to explore their sense of alienation in USA where life as an immigrant was unbearable, forcing them to make an effort towards the process of economic, social and cultural adjustment. Further, the paper will explore their desire for cultural fusion in the new dwelling, which in fact is Mukherjee’s own inward voyage in *The Middleman* and other stories. Finally, they visualized “assimilation” as on “end –product” which implies in totality “conforming to a national culture” of “nationalist way of life.”

**Key words:** Diaspora, alienation, assimilation, isolation, culture.

### INTRODUCTION

The word ‘Diaspora’, derived from the Greek word Diaspeiro, literally means scattering or dispersion of people from their homeland. Diasporic writing has been receiving increasing academic and disciplinary recognition. It has emerged as a distinct literacy genre. A large number of people have migrated from India to various alien lands under “forced exiles” or ‘self-imposed exiles’. Some of them have made a mark in the field of writing. These immigrant writers reflect, on one hand, their attachment to their motherland and on the other hand,

their feeling of alienation and rootlessness. Diasporic writings also known as ‘expatriate writings’ give voice to the traumatic experiences of the writers when they are on the rack owing to the clash of two cultures or the racial discrimination they undergo. Immigration proves a pleasant experience only to a few immigrants who succeed in assimilating themselves with new geographical, cultural, social and psychological environment. To most of the diasporic writers, immigration is not a delectable experience. They often find themselves

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sandwiched between two cultures. The feelings of nostalgia, a sense of loss and anxiety to reinvent home obsess them, consciously or unconsciously. They all voice the anguish of the people, living far away from their native land and being discriminated on the grounds of race, colour or creed.

Every immigrant experiences injustice, inequality, discrimination, biases, prejudices and a threat to cultural identity in the unfamiliar country. Adjusting with the social, economic, political, psychological and environmental changes is also a challenge. The abrupt change in the lifestyle, culture, status, society causes emotional and psychological problems. Adjusting with the changing scenario of their lives is a challenge. The Indian Diaspora focuses on the varied aspects of life abroad. The Indian women Diaspora writers have created a niche for themselves in the literary world. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others have taken great pains to focus on the world of immigrants.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the traumatic experiences and cultural perplexity of the first and second generation immigrants. It also focuses on universal dehumanization in the modern globalized world. Jhumpa Lahiri, one of the second generation immigrants in the USA, acknowledged as one of the women writers in Indian English Literature for her Indian themes is a recent new wave literary artist. She is the author of two acclaimed books: *The Interpreter of Maladies*, her debut collection of short stories and a novel, *The Namesake*. She has received many awards and among them the most prestigious Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Born in 1967 in London, she was raised in Rhode Island. Her latest collection of short stories is *Unaccustomed Earth*, in which she handled personal problems, social conflicts and cultural dilemmas with great depth. At the beginning of *The Namesake*, the issue of identity is presented. Culture of naming the baby is a practice in every society. Lahiri narrates this practice with bicultural implications with a style that leaves nothing untold. He captures best the essence of the lives of Bengali Indian in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America. However, Lahiri's (2008) *The Namesake* is such a wonderfully apt description of a Bengali Indian family that it does not give her American nationality away and she is now acclaimed away. She is now acclaimed as the chronicles of the Bengali immigrant experience. She describes how *ash-oke* abhors waste, even the extra water in a teapot- a common Indian middle class mindset. The Gangulis are shown taking precaution for everything that can go wrong, a constant fear of disaster as another typical Indian preoccupation. At the same time, she takes care to describe the second generation Indian immigrants- the children who do not care for see-off and coming home for every festival. Gogol and Moushumi do not wish to keep up the appearance of their marriage and Sonia decides to marry Ben- a non Bengali, non Indian man who Ashima ultimately trusts will give more happiness to her daughter than Moushumi ever did to her son. This is because rooting, uprooting and re-rooting the lives of

Individuals leave them devastated. Barrenness results due to lack of fertilizers like love, emotions, feelings of care, bonding close relationship and intimacy among individuals. The differences in social station widen the gap between husband and wife. Lives decay instead of flourishing in the new, adopted soil. From generations together the roots lay deep in the worn-out soil, spoiling, rotting the young buds in the name of modernity and globalization. Longing for and belonging to a different homeland creates a void which cannot be filled with any other nation. It is like leaving the inherited for adopting temporary, notorious, glamorous future. The homeland is a pious place of worship in the Diaspora imagination. Nostalgia for homeland, feeling of rootlessness, instability, insecurity and isolation cause intense pain and grief, as reclaiming the past is impossible. Bicultural life entraps the immigrants in a dilemma. The couples are unable to acclimatize completely into the foreign culture and society. The intermingling of the eastern and western ethics irks lives. Stability is the essentiality of the cultural transmission and cultural crisis, a part and parcel of their routine. Adopting the tradition of the native land and trying to learn new culture is a challenge.

Similarly, like Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee also discusses the complications of the place and time in which she has seen the immigrants. She has to respond and react to the dual culture positively taking the best from both sides and even negotiating between their identity and a hyphenated space. She vehemently asserts "I am an American citizen" from the core of her heart in her short story, *Two ways to Belong in American*, published in New York times in Bharati (1996). The preamble of the term 'alienation'<sup>1</sup> by Karl Marx in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been invigorated in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century with the progression of migration to America which has reached to the new height in terms of émigré populace. In the Social Sciences, 'Assimilation' is an approach toward incorporation and amalgamation, through which, not only immigrants but also other marginalized groups- African-American in America, women in society, scheduled castes in India-are "wrapped up" into an integrated conventional society.

Bharati Mukherjee is an investigating pioneer of innovative terrains, practices, and literatures that co-exist with her wide-ranging mission to discover new worlds. Bharati Mukherjee's foremost concern, as a postmodern writer, has been the life of South-Asian expatriates and the dilemma of 'acculturation' and 'assimilation'. Acculturation is the depressing upshot of post-modern scenario, which Mukherjee had comprehended much early. Mukherjee's characters are autobiographical portraits of her interpretation and reaction of her experience as an expatriate in Canada which was "a cultural and psychological 'mongrelization'" and her mounting identification of

<sup>1</sup> The concept of 'Alienation', developed by Marx is the subject of much interest in sociological discussions relating to the human condition and our relationship to society and the workplace.

the self as 'an immigrant nobody' in America. The two different sets of experiences- of an expatriate as well as an immigrant- are reflected through five novels, two collections of short stories and two non-fictional works co-authored with her husband, written in two different countries. Her two early novels *The Tiger's Daughters* (Bharati, 1972) and *Wife* (Bharati, 1975) were written during the period of alienation in Canada. Her characters are not controlled by one faith, one ethnic, racial or cultural proclivity. The Canadian occurrence, however, has left its own scratch marks and blemishes on Mukherjee's inherent sense of worth and stimulated and provoked her individuality. "I was always well- employed but never allowed to feel part of the local Quebec or larger Canadian society", she states.

The women portraits are the spokesperson of her own experiences; through them she extricates trials and tribulations. Instead of limiting to the constricted paradigm of deliberation, alienation also refers to the concept of transnationalism, multiculturalism and the theory of Diaspora. The idea and usage of transnationalism came into vogue with the term "transnational nation" by Randolph Bourne in 1916. The spotlight is on both transnational communities represented by Bharati Mukherjee as well as transnational interpretations represented by the characters in her novels and short stories and their experiences. Transnationalism in Bharati Mukherjee is a broader expression. The intrinsic triangular relationship exists between her as a migrant, and the "place of belonging" that is, India and destination countries- first Canada, and finally America, which in due course became the "place of belief". While it is difficult for an Asian person to assimilate into American culture, it is similarly difficult for an Asian- American to assimilate back to his native country. In a paradoxical situation, Tara Banerjee in *The Tiger's Daughter* is alienated in her American set of connections and then alienated from her roots of pedigree. She suffers the spasm of estrangement which is awfully unfortunate. Her pain of alienation is evident not only in Canada and America but even in her indigenous terrain of Bengal and wonders "how does the foreignness of spirit begin?", when she returns to India after seven years. It is at that moment she excruciatingly realizes that she is neither an Indian nor an American. With the advent of globalization, Diaspora, in particular, has attained new connotations, significance associated with design such as global deterritorialisation, transnational migration and cultural hybridity.

#### **DIASPORIC COMMUNITY IN THE NOVELS OF BHARTI MUKHERJEE**

Bharati Mukherjee's first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* is a materialization of the diasporic community and hence alienated. Tara Banerjee, the main protagonist, is the 'other' disjointed community who struggles to hook-on to the nationalized community by entering into the wedlock

with an American, David Cartwright. According to Milton Gordon, the eminent sociologist, inter-marriage leads to marital assimilation which is an "intermixture of the two 'gene pools' which the two populations represent, regardless of how similar or divergent these two gene pools may be". David Cartwright is wholly Western. The more Tara becomes cognizant of this point of divergence between the Indian wife and the American husband, the more she is apprehensive of the verity that she is a detachable entity from the nationalized community. Her first manifestation of alienation in a territory of immigration is through *The Tiger's Daughter*. Tara Banerjee, the key protagonist, is a Brahmin girl who travels to America for advanced studies. In order to assimilate herself to her new surroundings, she marries an American like Mukherjee did. A sociological theory, proposed by Glazer and Moynihan (1970) arose in the sixties. They proposed a 'melting pot paradigm', which takes a closer look at the process of migrants' integration in the case of New York City. The authors argue that migrants like Tara Banerjee are more prone to assimilate to a common (American) model but at the same time they increasingly retain their ethnicity more than ever. Tara Banerjee evaluates her life and ethics with that of her husband's. Contrary to the cultural belief; her ethnicity comes to direct blows when her conjugal life which was supposed to be based on the standard code of 'union' identified by her right from her childhood, was actually based on the principle of 'contract' as identified by her husband. The wistful, passionate sensitivity of an immigrant for her mother country is dashed to pieces when it comes into direct blows with reality. The "Americanization" of her finer sensibilities; her unruffled and frosty response to her nickname 'Tultul'; her response to her relatives' house which seemed elegant and chic to her previously looked shabbier afterwards startle her. The character of Tara is aghast and horror-struck at this swing in response. Tara is an immigrant 'sandwiched between personality' woman and suffers the 'duality and conflict' very divergent to her American life. The moral fiber of Tara's character, like the novelist, suffers from the cultural dichotomy "surrendering those thousands of years of 'pure culture". The 'epidemics, collision, fatal accidents, and starvation" of Calcutta, the omnipresence of her husband David in the midst of rioting rabble and her own westernization over the period of seven years add to her anguish and misery.

Not only "alienation" but also the "transcendence of alienation" is an inherently holistic concept. Bharati Mukherjee learnt to overcome the traumatic experiences of the 'other' from her mentor Malamud but at the same time she realized "the different sense of self, of existence and of mortality" that differentiated her from Malamud.

Estrangement is a generalist standpoint and it, too, has been condemned to some disgruntlement. In *Wife* (Bharati, 1975), Mukherjee writes about a woman named Dimple who has been suppressed by men. She is desirous to be the idyllic Bengali wife, but out of foreboding

fear and delicate volatility, she assassinates her husband and ultimately commits suicide. Bharati Mukherjee's characterization of Dimple lends a divergent and an intricate perspective to the theme of immigration and subsequent alienation. Dimple is a middle class married woman who wishes to migrate and finally migrates from Calcutta to New York with a hope that "Marriage would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities. Marriage would bring her love".

For her, migration and marriage are synonymous with each other. She presumes that her migration to New York with her husband after marriage would gratify, enchant and liberate her from the expected unhappiness and afflictions. The author impresses upon her readers that immigration for some is an exodus from reality. Her failure to grasp the pleasures of existence in New York with its bigness which "she had never seen before" is symbolic of failure of her marriage to Amit. The novel, *Wife*, is a perfect version of peripheral confusions regarding American culture and habitat and internal commotion to choose between personal deliverance, on one hand and matrimonial bondage, on the other hand, that Dimple suffers from. Dimple shows signs of dilemma of cultures which is a domino effect of her phobic condition in the end. Two incidents from the novel, one, her enforced self-abortion and the other, her atrocious assassination of her husband are emblematic expression of her turmoil flanked by the other and the self.

Taking into consideration the Chicago School, in particular the work of Park (1930), and his socio-political analysis into consideration, Bharati Mukherjee's assimilation is a progressive and an irreversible phenomenon, justified by her struggle for subsistence in an alien milieu. Warner and Srole (1945) were the first to launch the notion of "straight line assimilation". This has been a seminal decisive model in the sociological literature, the crucial squabble being that migrants' behavior will become in due course increasingly similar to that of natives. Bharati Mukherjee metamorphoses, through her novels, from an expatriate in Canada to an immigrant in the United States of America. Canada offers a mosaic of multiculturalism that persuades people to preserve their unique cultural characteristics whereas United States proffers an assimilating melting pot to persuade all and sundry to become part of a homogeneous mass.

## CONCLUSION

A most recent development in the analysis is the "segmented assimilation" paradigm developed by Portes and Zou (1993). In this view, migrants assimilate in different strata of the host society. Bharati Mukherjee's stay in Canada reflects "the sense of betrayal had its effect and drove me and thousands like me from the country" on the paradigm of "segmented assimilation". Bharati Mukherjee industriously demarcates the process of migrants'

integration into the host country from a social point of view assessing the degree of social integration and assimilation, from being an expatriate deracinated from her roots in the early 70s, her autobiographical projection of characters in the early 80s exploring the dilemma of transition. Secondly, through her characters, she explores the migrants' own perceptions about their integration rather than natives' attitude toward migrants.

Dimple realizes the ethnic characteristics of the "little India" where Indian-Americans live. It is very difficult to evaluate whether these Indian migrants' that live in ethnically homogeneous communities have a predilection to socialize more. She instantaneously indoctrinates the Americanization of the personality in her character but the persistent Indianness seems to stick to the subsurface of her adaptations.

Migrants like Tara, Dimple, have a propensity to converge, and so does Bharati Mukherjee albeit quite gradually, to the standard of natives. Bharati Mukherjee in her candid confession bemoans the state of "overseas citizenship while expecting the permanent protection and economic benefits that come with living and working in America". The constant reminder of language, physical differences and loss of the native land no longer problematizes the exceptionally intricate endeavor of assimilation, rather, Jasmine's peculiarity of her personality adds to the mystic charm.

"Amalgamation" is distinguished by Park and Burgess as "a biological process, the fusion of races by interbreeding and intermarriage. Assimilation, on the other hand, is limited to the fusion of cultures". Bharati Mukherjee unambiguously has castoff the hyphenated sticky tag 'Indian-American,' regardless of the fact that she is an expatriate from India.

To conclude, we can say that words like disintegration, exile, alienation, disorder, and a quest for identity are the terms often applied for defining the experience of emergent.

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