

# Identity in Flux: A Critical Study of Bharti Mukherjee's Novel

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## Abstract

Bharti Mukherjee is a prominent expatriate woman writer in the post-colonial era, whose literary works vividly capture the ethos and sentiments of American society through the lens of immigrants. Her novels provide a poignant portrayal of the nomadic aspirations of Indians who, driven by the pursuit of a more prosperous life, make the journey to the West. In doing so, they grapple with the challenges of adaptation that ultimately culminate in assimilation. What sets Mukherjee apart from her contemporaries is her optimistic perspective on the immigrant experience. She envisions a path toward modernity and cosmopolitanism, advocating for mutual assimilation and acculturation not just for herself but also for the characters in her fictional universe. Mukherjee's body of work charts a progressive journey, starting with the theme of expatriation and gradually transitioning towards immigration, resulting in a nuanced portrayal of acculturation. This paper aims to trace the evolution of Mukherjee's identity as a writer, as depicted in her novels "*The Tiger's Daughter*", "*Wife*", and "*Jasmine*". These literary works chronicle the profound journey of her characters, from initial feelings of alienation to the challenging process of adjustment, ultimately leading to successful adaptation within their new and unfamiliar surroundings.

**Keywords:** Expatriate, Immigrant, Assimilation, Acculturation, Alienation, Adaptation.

## Introduction

Standing at the forefront of contemporary expatriate writing, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya seem to have a varied relationship with India. Possessing strong links with India by birth all these writers have expressed their affection for India as an overpowering presence. However, their individualist, modern, western-oriented viewpoints reflect, a disdain for the violence and chaos of the Indian plurality. Bharati Mukherjee follows a characteristic paradigm, which begins with restlessness, repression of the past and an over-acceptance of the present. She believes in assimilation with the West, which she finds easier though not pleasing. Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai treat the Indian immigrant situation as one of conflict and adjustment with a little understanding and love. For them the disillusioning alien experience results in disenchantment with the West; tormented, they look back with nostalgia, longing for home. Except for Bharati Mukherjee these expatriate writers are unable to let go of India completely. India may be wrong in its particulars, but as an entity holds an attraction, a promise of depth, which residence in the West has failed to achieve. Their attitude towards India comprises nostalgia, agitation, troubling restlessness, and neurotic responses that appear to be the common personality traits of the protagonists of these expatriate writers, be they Dimple of *Wife* or Dev of *Bye-Bye Blackbird*. Withdrawing physically from India, these writers make a return through their fictional works. The West provides the intellectual life, but it is India, which tugs at the imagination. Amidst fragmentation, whether

their loyalties be towards their adopted country or the country of their origin, the insecurity in the alien environment that the migrant experiences. India as part offers a promise of wholeness. For some, this promise is attractive from a distance as in the case of Tara of *The Tiger's Daughter* which is frustrated by mingling with India. Still, exile brings only a measure of satisfaction to these writers which accounts for their consistently looking back at India either through a process of self-recovery, resorting to history and memory, or through a process of self-preservation through an act of transformation hinted in their works.

Bharati Mukherjee questions and orders facts to shed values, and redundant roots which hamper her process of assimilation in the mainstream of America. She attempts to move towards a cosmopolitan and modern civilization. The study of her works reveals a transformation of the novelist from an immigrant writer to an American author. In one of her interviews she says "I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island" said Bharti Mukherjee to Alison B. Carb. Detachment provides her with a new angle. Since Mukherjee's expatriation was the outcome of her own choice, it was thrust not even on her characters which made their assimilation easy though not always pleasurable i.e. rising to their desired expectation. Bharati Mukherjee's fiction prominently features expatriate characters. She has made a definite distinction between expatriates and immigrants, Expatriates she claims have a cultural retentiveness which, ensures that they remain a visible minority. Whereas immigrants must necessarily transform themselves by taking risks and letting go of the past in order to become assimilated into the new social and cultural role in the adopted homeland.

Bharati Mukherjee's memorable novel *The Tiger's Daughter* reflects her pride in Indianness, but at the same time, there is also a decision to celebrate America. In one sense she is a writer of the Indian diaspora, who writes in English, but at the same time, she wants to be a mainstream American writer who hates to be called an ethnic writer. She poignantly deals with the experience of Indians making their passage from India to America depicting the dreamers with realism and questioning the dream with irony. One finds that the approach in her novels is as a female bildungsroman starting from *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife* and then moving on to *Jasmine*. Through these novels, she has specifically traced the development of her female protagonist from Tara to Dimple and then to Jasmine. These women go through various experiences and crises, and in turn become mature, and more importantly, assert their identity and place in an alien world. *The Tiger's Daughter* represents the true expatriate sensibility, depicting the grotesque aspect of cultural conflict. It shows how the expatriate experiences double cultural shock and feels uneasy not only in the alien country but also in the native cultural milieu where he was born and brought up. The same happens with Dimple, the central figure of *Wife*. There is a constant tension in the psyche of Dimple for the preservation of her Indian self and her efforts to adapt to American society. Mukherjee describes the alienation of expatriation in these two women, a sense of gulf between themselves and the native people and tradition. Tara's efforts to adapt, herself to American society are measured by her revulsion and rejection of Indian modes of life. She develops a dislike for all those things once she had loved before moving to America. Tara, away from home, cherishes nostalgic memories of home and defends her family and country vehemently in America. At the same time, she is shown to be perturbed and disturbed by the worsening situation in India. Her newly acquired American personality makes it difficult to adjust to the Indian ways of life and situation, and she wishes to go back to her husband in America with whom she finds peace and security. There is a strange fusion of Americanness and Indianness in the psyche of Tara. As a result, she finds herself a misfit wherever she goes; with her dangling personality she tries to look

Indian and adjust with her friends but it appears that there is an invisible gap between them which makes her torn apart. She is forced to look at her inner world consisting of two cultures and two different ideologies that are two worlds wide apart and realizes the reconciliation of the two is impossible. Mukherjee has depicted a strange fusion of Indianness and Americanness in Tara, which are always in confrontation with each other. Her American self and Western culture constantly clash with her native culture, which leaves her lonely and alienated in her own country. There seems to be an invisible vacuum that cannot be filled, leaving herself split up like any other immigrant. Bharati Mukherjee has deliberately avoided immigrant writer's temptation to fall into the trap of glorifying the native country and belittling and degrading the adopted country. She has presented a fascinating study of the problem of the displaced person in America as well as India.

*Wife* is an extension of *The Tiger's Daughter* which reverses the role again clearly portraying the cultural shock that an Indian girl faces on going abroad. The novel again shows the displacement and alienation for it portrays the psychological claustrophobia, which results in the destructive tendency in Dimple, the heroine of the novel. Mukherjee shows how psychological and geographical displacement leads the character to murder her husband, Amit, to feel American somehow. Her sensibilities become confounded with the changing cultural roles and the conflicts, which she has to face. Mukherjee has shown the dilemma of entrapment faced by Dimple. whether to accept the American culture and society, or adhere to the social constraints that surround an Indian wife; between a feminist desire to be assertive, and the Indian need to be submissive and self-effacing. Though married to an educated and liberal husband, Dimple is not able to strike a balance between the two juxtaposed worlds, the one she has left behind and the other she has come to live in. Dimple, unwilling to brave the new world outside, feels bored, dejected, and dismally ignorant of actual patterns of social life interaction drives her to a neurotic state. Her sudden forays into the outside world prove abortive ending on a tragic note. Dimple is very unlikely Sita and Savitri the women that are idealized by Indians generally, who look upon their husbands as Gods and are ready to sacrifice everything for them. Dimple breaks the seven vows of marriage by stabbing seven times on her husband's back, violating the collective consciousness of the 'dharma' of a wife and also the Gandhian principles of Ahimsa. Like Bhabhani's characters rooted in the principles of satyagraha, forfeit cultural and spiritual heritage by going abroad. It can be envisaged what misery, ostracization and Isolation she will have to face after her rash act

Both Tara and Dimple are shown as middle women straddling between two cultures experiencing cultural shock in diametrically opposite conditions, Both the heroines are disillusioned with the violent life be it in India or America failing to adjust to the new cultural environment. M.L. Pandit comparing the two novels *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife* says “Both Tara and Dimple are projected as 'middlewomen' between two cultures and both are shown as experiencing cultural shock in diametrically opposed conditions. Their disillusionment with India and America, respectively, is not sudden but gradual, over a period of time, in stages. They take drastic steps at the end to get away from cultural maladjustment that enmeshes them.”<sup>1</sup>

Mukherjee's works reveal a gradual movement from alienation to assimilation in the World of adoption. Mukherjee who has asserted her American self has shown the experience of assimilation through her third novel *Jasmine*. The novel is about survival. It manifests South Asian immigrant women's metamorphosis,

self-invention, and empowerment. In *Jasmine*, she celebrates both the undaunted spirit and enthusiasm of a village girl who blossomed out of a bruised past into a challenging personality. A complete individual and the status of immigration in the US, facilitates aliens not only to be acculturated but also to be assimilated into the adopted land. Mukherjee points out in one of her interviews “In the long run my characters are survivors; they have been helped, as I have been by good strong people of conviction.”<sup>2</sup> There seems in the works of Bharati Mukherjee's trenchant criticism of oppressive patriarchal practice in India as well as her celebration of the redemptive liberalist postures subsequently adopted by these women when they immigrate to the United States.

Displacement in Bharati Mukherjee's characters has led from alienation to a search for self. *Jasmine* dramatizes movement from nostalgia to focus upon changing identity, to establish new relationships. *Jasmine*, the protagonist faces a multicultural society and exhibits a deep awareness of the social reality that surrounds her. The multicultural ethos with, which she is confronted with a struggle for a new break from her past life. *Jasmine* shows how Mukherjee increases the distance between herself and her protagonist from novel to novel. While Tara seems to be quite close to her, Dimple represents Indians in North America and *Jasmine* exemplifies all immigrants who have taken their destiny in their hands. *Jasmine* the protagonist embodies the spirit of America. In shaping *Jasmine*, Bharati Mukherjee takes care to embed her protagonist's story with the stories of other immigrants in America. But she is careful to distinguish between those who have the spirit to survive and prosper in America and those who are bound to end up in frustration like Du who fails to adjust to the new environment. “*Jasmine* embodies all major themes that attracted Mukherjee as a writer in the past and is the climax of the literary voyage that has transformed her from a chronicler of exile to champion of immigration”.<sup>3</sup> Thus through *Jasmine*, Mukherjee celebrates an openness to new experiences, Americanization, and acclimatization of the Third World in the celebration of mainstream America which is enriched by those she describes as 'new power. Through her work, she celebrates her sense of belonging to America by pushing her heroine to the edges of their world and then liberating them for a new World order.

As an exponent of the expatriate novel, Mukherjee writes about the experience and lifestyle of human beings who suffer from cultural dichotomy and rootlessness. In her effortless and dramatic style, she has captured and portrayed an immigrant's image and shown the readers what it is to "become American". Unlike the expatriate, with his nostalgia for the past, her immigrants plunge into the present and get enthusiastically involved in the environment around them. While the exile parades pains and grievances, Bharati Mukherjee's immigrants celebrate the fact of being alive in a new world and being reborn. The assimilation involved in immigration does not mean denial of the past, but of giving a rigid hold on to the past. It may suggest the personal odyssey of Mukherjee. At the thematic level, there is a movement from expatriation to immigration. The ongoing journey becomes a metaphor for the universal quest from alienation to integration what is remarkable in Mukherjee's novel is the images of diaspora, those hard brilliant cameos of immigrant psyche struggling after faltering, sometimes refusing, at other times, perfectly adjusting to come to terms with history.

## Conclusion

Bharati Mukherjee evinces a more positive view of immigrants, the life in the United States, than her counterpart, glimpsing occasionally the redeeming possibilities of love and self-affirming opportunities

for the pursuit of happiness, though neither love nor happiness is ever obtained without pain or a price. Mukherjee's novels highlight the complexities of acculturation, as characters negotiate their cultural heritage while incorporating elements of new culture this at time leads to blending as well as tensions between different cultures and norms. Mukherjee's exploration is not limited to personal experience but also sheds light on the complexities of immigrant life, the clash of cultures, and the evolving nature of a multicultural society. Thus the themes of alienation, assimilation; and acculturation are central to Bharti Mukherjee's body of work. Through her novels, she offers a thought-provoking and insightful perspective on the immigrant experience in America and the profound impact of cultural displacement and adaptation on individuals on communities.

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