

## **Blend of Fact and Fiction in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is an in-depth analysis of portrayal of women in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee. Most of her women characters are from India who migrates to America for a specific purpose. The first two of her novels deals with expatriates and the rest with immigrant experiences in the new world. Bharati Mukherjee has acquired a strong place among the diasporic writers through her writings which portrays the sufferings and survival of immigrant women. Mukherjee's women immigrants undergo a major and essential change in the process of living in the adopted homeland. All these are beautifully woven through her protagonists making them bold and assertive to face any kind of situation in the new land.

**Keywords:** immigrants, expatriates, multi-dimensional, South Asian women, diaspora

### **Bharati Mukherjee as an American Writer**

Bharati Mukherjee is an example for the expatriate writers who claimed that they were Canadians or Americans or British Asians rather than Indians. She called herself, 'an American writer, in the American mainstream, trying to extent it. This is a vitally important statement for me – I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant; my investment is in the American reality, not the Indian' (Narayan 52). Bharati Mukherjee has created a fair place for herself in the American literature through her contribution to English writing. She is one of the few prominent Indian American immigrant writers who have not only earned a good name in the U.S. but has also contributed considerably to the third world literature.

Mukherjee's creative oeuvre comprises seven novels – *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004) and two collections of short stories – *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and the Other Stories* (1988).

Bharati Mukherjee admits of being subjected to racial discrimination in Canada. In the book, *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee*, Nagendra Kumar describes Mukherjee's experience as 'a psychological expatriate' in Canada. To quote his words, "I remember how bracing it was to cloak myself in my own Brahminical elegance" (18). She became a civil rights activist in Canada and wrote about the crippling effect of racism on individuals. Not only in the personal and political writings of Mukherjee but also in her Canadian fiction, the experience of expatriation poignantly manifested. Her essay **Invisible Woman** is a blistering reflection on her stay in Canada. In U.S.A., Bharati Mukherjee sees herself with an immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality and flexible identity. The choice of the writer from expatriation to immigration is also reflected in the choice of the writers who shaped Mukherjee's creative sensibility.

### **Mukherjee's Female Characters**

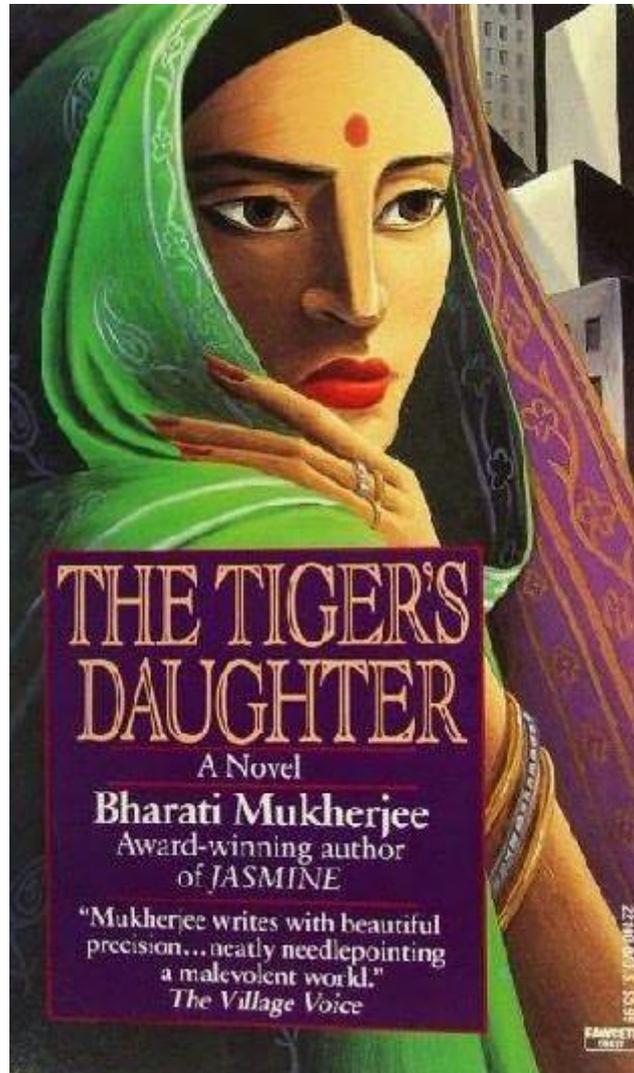
Mukherjee attempted to project women as the central figure in her novels. She succeeded most effectively in representing the predicaments of women. Her instinctive perception and insight into women's reactions and responses, problems and perplexities, the complex working of their inner selves, their emotional involvements and disturbances helped her in portraying a life-size picture of the contemporary women with all their longings, aspirations, hopes and frustrations. Her female characters are people on the periphery of the society in which they have chosen to spend their lives. They are all immigrants and new ones at that while analyzing the problems encountered by the immigrants and new society, Oscar Handlin in *The Uprooted* states:

You long of course for the safety, you cherish still the ideals of the nest. But the danger and insecurity are other words for freedom and opportunity. You are alone in a society without order; you miss the support of a community, the assurance of the defined rank. But you have also quit traditional obligations, of the confinement of a given station." (5)

Mukherjee's women immigrants undergo a major and essential change in the process of living in the adopted homeland. The assimilation did not mean a denial of past thoroughly, which is impossible, but probably meant giving up a rigid hold of the past, and once this was

successfully accomplished, the immigrants were able to find their roots in the alien soil, which was now their adopted country.

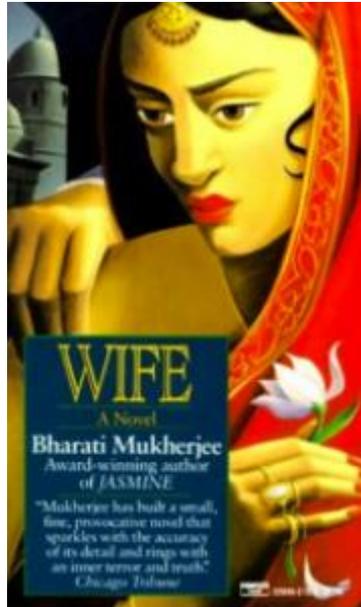
### ***The Tiger's Daughter* – A Manifestation of Cultural Conflict**



Bharati Mukherjee's first novel is *The Tiger's Daughter*. It is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict. It explores the condition of being an Indian expatriate. In conceiving the character of Tara, Mukherjee has already begun to distance herself from the role of an expatriate. She models so well in her novel the deep and persistent undercurrent of nostalgia almost sensual in character. The writer does not attempt a family saga, but set about exposing how it feels for a young girl to leave sheltered home, hedged by class privilege and wealth, return home, a fully grown young woman to come after breaking all social taboos by marrying a foreigner and see whether she can find a place at home again. She realizes that she

could not communicate with that society because the society where Tara meets again is without a vision of the west.

### *Wife*



Courtesy: <http://www.salford.ac.uk/arts-media/about/arts-and-media-news-folder/arts-and-media-graduate-programme-marriage-as-the-medium-of-exploitation-in-wife-by-bharati-mukherjee>

*Wife* brings a unique Indian perspective to the standard of immigrant fiction, failed quests, thwarted dreams, dislocation and isolation leading to marital stress, demand of a new and hostile cultural environments, loss of supportive community and loss of a relatively coherent earlier identity. Dimple's is a case of a feminist and an immigrant's crisis in her life. Isolated in an alien country with no supportive base, no traditional values to hold on to and no hardy rules of dominant culture to help the new comers like Dimple, all these are exposed to dangerous lives, fast-paced and mercenary in nature.

In Dimple's America, in her enforced isolation, she is left alone to the fatal submission of the fantasy narrative of American culture and soap operas portraying the lives of women of her host culture. It is a moving study of a relatively docile person's inexplicable explosion into violence. The senseless, violent act of the protagonist in murdering her husband Amit may be viewed as a desperate act on the part of Dimple in Americanizing herself. It is misguided act of self assertion that comes as a consequence of misguided Americanization. Bharati Mukherjee employs much wit, good ear of dialogue and deep

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insight into her character. In writing of the aborted Americanization of Dimple in life, Bharati Mukherjee herself is already moving towards it. The style becomes distinctly American. She discarded irony for passion.

### **Non-fiction Works**

Even though Bharati Mukherjee's first two novels are well received and invited enthusiastic response in the west, there was a gap of almost ten years before her third work of fiction appeared. She turns to other genres, her mind diverted due to the rabid racism of Canada. She collaborated with her husband, Clark Blaise, *On Days and Nights in Calcutta*. The first half of the book is Blaise's response to his experience of India, while second half of the book is Bharati Mukherjee's account of the upper – middle class life around her, during their one year sojourn in Calcutta in 1970. It is not the account of one year that she writes about, but the urgency of her life, the life of a particular class at a particular time in Calcutta's history. It is while writing this book that she realized that in spite of all the racial trauma she was undergoing in Canada, it is still the new world that she wanted to live in.

The second non-fictional work, in collaboration with Clark Blaise is *The Sorrow and Terror: the Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy*. It is about the Air India plane crash, off the coast of Ireland, during its flight Toronto to Bombay. The crash killed three hundred and twenty nine persons, mostly Canadian Indians. The Canadian Government is perceived to be indifferent to the tragedy, seen as an Indian disaster only.

### ***Darkness***

*Darkness* is the next collection of her short stories Bharati Mukherjee appeared confident enough to include a wide range of character from various countries and strata of society in this collection of short stories. The book is very well received and her compact but fluid style is a matter of gradual evolution. In an adroit mixture of narratives voices, male and female, young and old, she expresses the resourcefulness of her resident aliens. The women characters in this collection of stories are shown to attempt to break free from tradition in a liberating environment. Their resourcefulness and inventiveness are important tools for survival and success. The third world immigrants, whose lives are depicted in the *Middleman and Other Stories*, are conquerors who boldly stake their claim to their adopted and adoptive land. Her stories show the eagerness and enthusiasm of the immigrants in chasing the

American dream. In the process they may get the codes wrong. In this book they are shown to be involved in the process of conquest over themselves.

In *Jasmine*, she tries to unravel the complex layers of cross cultural reality through a sequence of adventures which the heroine undergoes during her journey from Punjab to California via Florida, New York and Iowa. Her struggle symbolizes the restless quest of a rootless person piqued by a depressing sense of isolation all around. The story opens with the village astrologer sitting under his banyan tree foretelling Jasmine's 'widowhood and exile'. It all turns out just as nastily as he says it will, but at the same time Jasmine is a survivor, a fighter and adapter.

Jasmine's life journey leads her to many transformations – Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase and Jane in different locales across the world like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally California. Jasmine fights against her fate and the way that exhaust her. The narrative shuttles between past and present, between India and America, between the narrator's early life and her present one. Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Hasnapur, Punjab and her marriage to Prakash Vijn has resulted to her departure to America.

### ***The Holder of the World***

Mukherjee explores other ramifications of cultural confrontation in *The Holder of the World*. It is also a tale about dislocation and transformation arising when two cultures come onto contact with each other. This novel has a wide canvas that sweeps across continents and centuries, cultures and religions. Immigration, exile, alienation and foreign land have always been the colour of Mukherjee's palate and with *The Holder of the World*, she uses the familiar tones and shades to create a universe of infinite possibility and eternal time, Arhia Sattar. In a review of *The Holder of the World* an unlikely and intriguing meeting of two worlds, the puritan 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century American world trying to come to terms with the Mughal view of Indian life is witnessed. The inspiration behind this 'fantastic' story is an ordinary incident on an ordinary day.

### **Issues of Self Identity and Cross-Cultures - *Jasmine***

To explore the issues of self identity and cross-cultures, Mukherjee used fiction where the Indians migrate to West and Westerners to India. The former is dealt with in the novels

like *Jasmine, Wife and Desirable Daughters* and latter is found in the novels like *The Holder of the World* and *Leave it to Me*.

Among the writers of Diaspora, Mukherjee has secured a special position and her work reveals a kind of approach towards life where a protagonist has to work hard to establish her own identity in the society for survival, for a new way of life as reflected in the unique novel *Jasmine*. Moreover, it has become obvious that *Jasmine*, one of the best creations of Mukherjee, reflects the boldness of a heroine who can go to any extent for the autonomy and fulfillment of her own desires in the male dominating society.

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the journey of the young woman to the U.S., escapes from her widowhood life and she passes through torturous physical, mental and emotional agony. Jasmine starts her life in U.S. with a murder. She is very much excited in the new world. She has broken away from the shackles of caste, gender and family. She brings death to Half-Face, she brings happiness to Duff and Taylor as a traditional, self-sacrificing Indian woman and she is offering love to Du as loving mother. A close experience of both the worlds – the western and the Indian – gives Bharati Mukherjee an authentic and objective perspective with a delicious combination of grief, desires and self-sacrifice.

Bharati Mukherjee's own creativity pushes her heroines to the edges of her world and liberates for a new world's order. Jasmine's every movement is a calculated step into her Americanization and with each development a vital change is marked in her personality. Jasmine's flight to Iowa and her renaming as Jane is inactive of a slow but steady immersion into the mainstream American culture.

### **Use of Language**

The most important particularity of Mukherjee's strategies is her use of language. Reshaping of self involves reshaping of language as well. Mukherjee uses neither contemporary Indian English nor colonial British in her stories. In her novels, Bharati Mukherjee handles the situation full of pathos, grief, grace, passion, temptation and self-sacrifice. Mukherjee's success lies in her technical virtuosity. Mukherjee succeeds in developing and resolving the problem of racial encounters and cultural collisions.

Mukherjee has presented a fascinating study of the problems and difficulties of a displaced person in the United States as well as in India. She is hailed in U.S.A. as, “the supreme lyricist of ‘The Great American Mix’ for her daring, intimate perfectly ventriloquised narratives of the immigrant experience” (Padma 1).

The synthesis between tradition and modernity has given her a true perspective where she can see traditional Indian and contemporary American way of life. Jasmine gains a personality and becomes a confident individual. The multi-dimensional roles of the protagonist are quite fast but she is unable to slow down the pace as she is unwilling to abandon the ride she is on. With infinite care Bharati Mukherjee sketches her protagonist’s gradual transformation and multi-dimensional character of Jasmine but sometimes there is conflict between two selves, one still holding fast to traditional Indian values of life and the other an adventurer in a capitalistic culture. As she so succinctly puts it, “For every Jasmine the reliable care-giver, there is Jase the proliferate adventurer” (176).

### **Autobiographical Narrative**

Bharati Mukherjee is an autobiographical writer, in the common place of critical literature on her. Nagendra Kumar states the view of Mukherjee, who points out her expanding vision, “I have been wise enough to move away from particular autobiographical concerns- that my themes are larger my strategies more complex. Multi-culturalism / diversity are key words for being American; they’ve also what I think are dramatizing, injecting, ‘quickenings’ my fiction” (25).

Mukherjee's narrative wanders between worlds from India to America and America to India, in time from past to present, and also visualizes the time in future. Thus, we can conclude that Bharati Mukherjee’s novels are a perfect blend of fact and fiction.

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