



BHARATI MUKHERJEE: AN ICONIC FIGURE IN INDIAN DIASPORA WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT :

Bharati Mukherjee's works mainly focus on the issues of Indian women and their struggle in migration, the status of new immigrants and the feelings of expatriates. She herself is in exile from India, expatriate in Canada and an immigrant in the United States. Mukherjee's own struggle for identity works as motivating force behind her protagonists' attempts to search for their identities.

KEYWORDS : *Diaspora, migration, immigrants, identity, cultural shock, subordinate, depression and frustration.*

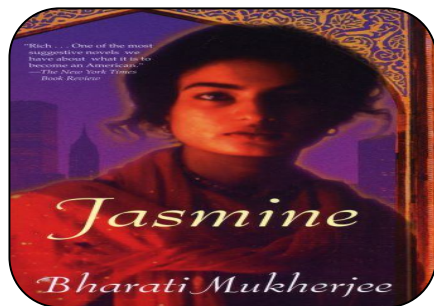
INTRODUCTION-

Mukherjee is at her best to draw on her experiences of the India and Canada while writing with insight about the New World in America to which she belongs. She describes her American experience as one of the 'fusions' and immigration as a 'two-way process' in which Americans and immigrants grow by the interchange and experience. Her recent books prove that she is an original writer in the American immigrant/multicultural literature. Through her novels and short stories, Mukherjee attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage. About her aim of writing, in an interview, Mukherjee expresses:

...when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society... I attempt to illustrate this in my novels and short stories. My aim is to expose Americans to the energetic voices of new settlers in this country. (Mukherjee, Sunday Review, 1989)

Bharati Mukherjee's most of the novels and short stories deal with the issues related to the life of women. Mukherjee represents her own experiences, feelings and problems through the stories of her immigrant women. Through her writing, she seizes upon the movement of immigration in all its intensity, confession and desperation of the people who have broken away from their cultural and historical roots. Shyam M. Asnani observes:

Since the immigrant writer speaks from the margins, his focus is off-centred. Likewise, his protagonist hardly ever takes center-stage, because it is not his-story that is being narrated. Instead, the narrative gives voice to community life, to local or national politics, to the experience of being alienated, obscured, peripheralised, and marginalized. The quest motif, which seems the archetypal pattern in the literature of the predominant mainstream culture, and which is also conceived in terms of a metaphoric and sometimes an actual voyage, undergoes here a sea change. (Asnani, 75-76)



Mukherjee focuses on cultural shock that a person experiences after the feelings of depression and frustration at the time of adjusting between two tremendously different cultures.

Mukherjee declares that she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of India during her own venture back to India with Clark Blaise. Her *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) presents a story of a young girl who, like Mukherjee herself, ventures back to Indian poverty and turmoil. In her joint publication with her husband *Days and Nights in Calcutta* (1977), she satirizes the mistreatment of women in the name of tradition by saying:

What is unforgivable is the lives that have been sacrificed to notions of propriety and obedience. (Mukherjee, 1986)

Mukherjee's *Wife* (1975), the short stories in *Darkness* (1985), an essay entitled "An Invisible Woman" and *The Sorrow and the Terror* (1987) —a joint effort with her husband present her own experience of racism in Canada as a humiliated professor. One of her short stories entitled "Isolated Incidents" explores her personal experiences of the biased Canadian view towards immigrants and how government agencies handled assaults on particular races. Another short story entitled "The Tenant" represents divorced immigrant Indian women and their mistreatment in the States and their experiences with interracial relationships. In her *Wife* a woman suppressed by men tries to be the ideal Bengali wife, but due to the fear about personal instability she murders her husband and commits suicide later. The stories in *Darkness* further endeavor to tell similar stories of immigrants and women.

Mukherjee in most of the stories in *The Middle Man and Other Stories* (1988), *Jasmine* (1989) and her essays continues writing about experiences of women in immigration. She explores the East and West relationship in her stories through experiences of the immigrant women in the context of great melting pot of culture in the U.S. and Canada.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* is a story of a young Hindu woman's dislocation, relocation and assimilation. Jasmine leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder. There she is raped and becomes caregiver. Jasmine presents that the treatment of women as subordinate is the similarity between the East and West. It is a story of despair and loss, rebels against age-old superstitions and traditions, rootless position and search for identity. The archetypal image of Kali-the Goddess of Destruction and an incarnation of Durga-the Goddess of Strength bring out the woman protagonist's feminist trait and the strength of a woman like Jasmine.

Mukherjee in her feminist novel *The Holder of the World* (1993) continues her focus on immigrant women and their freedom from relationships to become individuals. She also uses the female characters to explore the spatiotemporal connection between different cultures. It suggests woman liberation through historical evidences of recurrent defying and rejecting cultural stereotypes in the historical times as well as in the contemporary society where conventional answers no longer satisfy.

Mukherjee's *Leave It to Me* (1997) is a revenge story of an abandoned young woman and her vengeful search for real her parents. The political and emotional topics focus on the conflict between the Eastern and Western worlds and also on mother-daughter relationship. Thus, Mukherjee shifts from immigrant diasporic writer to multicultural writer and reverts to an exile's agony to make the predicament of the woman protagonist crystal-clear.

Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters* (2002) is a story of three Bengali sisters. It suggests the rebel of intelligent and artistic girls, nevertheless, constrained by the society which has little regard for women. Though the rebels of these sisters lead them in different directions, continents and different circumstances, their strain ultimately strengthens their relationship. One of the Bengali sisters lives in New Jersey among the elite class of migrant Indians.

Mukherjee's next novel *The Tree Bride* (2004) is a mythic family story in which a five year old girl is a victim of the archaic custom of child marriage. The tradition of the child marriage with a tree is a tool in the hands of patriarchy to subjugate women. The socio-cultural history presents immigrants' different circumstances and the impact of the Western culture on ethnic Bengali society. Mukherjee uses women's silence as a symbol of oppression and subaltern condition and speech as a symbol of self-expression and liberation in the patriarchal hegemony. Mukherjee in an interview with Runar Vignisson expresses her opinion about the immigrant experience in all over Europe:

Western Europe, Canada and England treat their non-European immigrants, even if they have been there for two and three generations, as though they are guest workers. They never accept them as real

citizens. The other thing is that people who come and work in Europe, or even settle in Europe, are encouraged to retain their cultures so that it would not occur to the immigrants, the Turks for instance, to think of themselves as Danes and so on. (Mukherjee, 1993)

Mukherjee has realistically presented problems of young women of Third World immigrant population, who cherish the dream of emigrating to America for higher prosperity. The dreamed America is different from real complex one with the smugglers, robbers, pimps and middlemen. She portrays situations and difficulties of desperate immigrants' activities. To conclude, one may agree with S.K. Tikoo who comments:

"Bharati Mukherjee succeeds in a big way in welding the socio-cultural theme of immigration and transformation with the romantic theme of love and romance which makes the American dream of the immigrants a realizable possibility". (Tikoo, 1996)

Bharati Mukherjee's works mainly focus on the issues related to the Indian immigrant women and their struggle in migration. She is at her best to draw on her immigrant experiences which are explored through the East and West relationship in context of the great melting pot of culture in the U.S. and Canada. Her focus is on the culture shock that an immigrant experiences after the feelings of depression and frustration while adjusting between two tremendously different cultures. She stands as an iconic figure in the history of Indian Writings in English.

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