

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION OF WOMEN: ALIENATION, ASSIMILATION IN SELECT WORKS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE AND JHUMPA LAHIRI

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Abstract

Diaspora writing occupies an important place in Post-modern literature. Indian immigrant writers contributed hugely and shaped South Asian Diaspora into a much recognised branch of literature. Indian diaspora writers Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri have skillfully narrated the issues of Indian immigrants in Canada and America. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), and *Jasmine* (1989) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) are examined for diasporic perspectives in the present paper. Both writers deal with the diasporic issues of expatriate sensibility, nostalgia, identity crisis, multiculturalism, and assimilation in their novels.

Keywords: diaspora, identity crisis, alienation, cultural clash, assimilation.

INTRODUCTION

Indian diaspora writers Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri have contributed for the growth of Diasporic literature. Immigration often brings a host of troubles with it. Immigrants face the issues of discrimination, alienation, cultural clash, expatriate sensibility in foreign land. To lead a successful life, immigrants need to acculturate and assimilate in the alien land. The present study examines the diasporic perspectives like expatriation, alienation, displacement, nostalgia, cultural clash, assimilation etc in the select novels of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. The present study is carried out on the select works of these two writers. The works chosen for the study are Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), and *Jasmine* (1989) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013).

Bharati Mukherjee has given a voice to the South Asian writers to depict the plight of immigrants in Canada and America. She filled the gap in diasporic literature by effectively dealing with the immigrants' issues, their efforts to face the discriminating world as well their genuine interest to assimilate to the new world. Mukherjee considered immigration not as loss but a gain. Her protagonists show resistance to the dominating world and evolve themselves as new individuals through negotiation and reinvention. The critic, Anne Brewster termed Bharati Mukherjee's discourses on diaspora as 'neo-nationalism'¹. Mukherjee felt as an expatriate during her stay in Canada, she raised voice against racism. Later she migrated to the United States. She rejected the calling her with a hyphenated identity but considered herself as American.

Her novels *The Tiger's Daughter*, and *Wife* were written during the challenging years in Canada. Her *The Tiger's Daughter* represents protagonist's identity crisis as well an exile from India. Mukherjee told in one of her interviews that the protagonist in *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara was very much like herself and represents her first few years in Canada and her marriage and return to India. Immigrant experiences of displacement, expatriation, reminiscences of the past, racial discrimination, alienation are some of the major themes of her writings. Jasbir Jain remarks that Mukherjee's novels are representative of the expatriate sensibility.²

The Tiger's Daughter is about the protagonist, Tara who hails from a Bengali elite Hindu family and her emigration to the United States for education, her marriage with an American, feelings of rootlessness and expatriation during her visit to India

seven years later. Tara's early days in America were horrible as she was exposed to the new patterns of culture and living in the alien land. She longed for return to Calcutta. She faced discrimination from her friends in the hostel, she prayed Goddess Kali for strength to face the situation.

She married David, an American against the views of her father 'caste, class and province are more valuable in marriage' (The Tiger's Daughter: p13). David was holly westerner and did not comprehend the finer nuances of her family. For David, marriage was only a contract. Clash of culture is one of the diasporic elements. Tara experiences clash of culture in marrying David. The marriage with David left her in despair. Tara was unable to narrate her feelings during her visit to India, as she thought he would not understand them, being a foreigner. Tara's inability to remember a religious ritual to perform with her mother as 'it was not a simple loss. It was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and center.'(The Tiger's Daughter: p51)

In America, Tara felt rootless as she carried her ethnic and national identity in the adopted land and consciously tries to keep her Indian spirit. Tara longs to come to her native land for solace. After seven years of her stay, Tara returned to her home land. She was greeted at airport with new titles like 'Americanwali', and 'Tultul', which she felt strange. Calcutta was transformed a lot, news papers reported with details of epidemics, quarrels, poverty. The things in Calcutta seemed different. Her prolonged stay in America made her to see Calcutta differently. Jasbir Jain comments on her attitude as 'her reactions are those of a tourist, a foreigner.'³

Tara in her interactions with friends, relatives observed that she was changed much. She wondered, 'how does this foreignness of the spirit begin?'(The Tiger's Daughter: p37). Tara felt alienated. Her alienation might be the result of her marriage to an American and her western education.⁴ (shivarama Krishna) She felt her 'foreignness was a burden.'(The Tiger's Daughter: p62) She was torn between her two socio-cultural identities.

Tara experienced nostalgia. She was not happy with her interactions with family members, relatives and friends. Her visit to Darjeeling did not bring her peace. She feels alien in her native land. Calcutta seems to be the city of riots, class-struggle, labour unrest and workers seizing the warehouse. She was seduced by Tuntunwala, a politician. In great expectations about her country, Tara visits India. But she felt depressed, alienated, frustrated, felt all her expectations shattered. Realizing that the reconciliation is impossible, Tara feels to go back to David. But unfortunately becomes a victim to violence in India. Ananda Prabha Barat comments on Tara's self as, 'neither can she take refuge in her old Indian self nor in the newly discovered American self. The outcome of this confrontation is her split up psyche.'⁴

The novel Wife deals with the diasporic themes of expatriation and alienation. It depicts how the protagonist's dream turns into a nightmare leading to schizophrenic state and thus kills her husband. Dimple, the protagonist hails from a middle class family. She felt marriage would bring her freedom, happiness and love. But, she worried about her figure. Her deep hatred for her body and her efforts to improve brought her frustration. Finally, she married Amit an engineer and went to America. Dimple terminated her pregnancy by self abortion before going to America, as she felt pregnancy would be an hurdle in their new life. She fought with her husband that 'no one had consulted her before depositing it in her body.'⁵ (Wife: p31)

She experienced cultural shock in her interactions with other migrated families in the new country. Prodosh Mukherjee's marriage with his teacher, Marsha, Miss Singh marrying a male dancer seemed strange to her. However, Dimple tried to mingle with the culture of the land. She learned English language through Television shows and magazines.

Her marriage bond did not give the kind of life she aspired. Amit did not feed her fantasies. She placed Amit among just material comforts, 'she ranked husband, blender, colour TV, cassette tape recorder, and stereo.'⁶(Wife: p112) She fails to establish emotional contact with her husband. Dimple gets sick of obeying the orders of her husband. Her exposure to American culture has distanced her from Indian values. Dimple thought of seven ways to commit suicide. Asnani describes dilemma of cultures as 'Dimple is entrapped in a dilemma of tensions between American culture and society and the traditional constraints surrounding an Indian wife.'⁵ Amit consoled her that her boredom was because of cultural shock and that happened all the time to Indian wives.

Dimple tried to find the reasons for 'why was she so unhappy?' (Wife: p180) She lost her identity. Sivarama Krishna remarks that the loss of Dimple's identity is the result of her being an exile. It is all due to her loss of contact with reality.⁶ Her over-dependence on television has resulted in hallucinations and was unable to distinguish reality from a dream. She experiences emotional turmoil. In a dreamlike state, she killed her husband. The novel concludes on a statement that 'Woman on Television got away with murder.'⁷ (Wife: p213)

The novel *Jasmine* deals with a woman's struggle for identity. It speaks of the changing identities of the protagonist, from Jyoti to Jasmine, Jase, and Jane. The protagonist acts courageously and transforms herself through all of these identities. The novel begins with an astrologer's prediction of the protagonist's future foretelling her widowhood and exile. Jyoti was from a village in India. Jyoti's father died horribly in a bull attack. She is an ambitious girl. She married Prakash. Prakash gave Jyoti a new name Jasmine. He said, 'You'll quicken the whole world with your perfume.' (Jasmine: p77). They planned to go to America to start a real life. He thought they could enjoy freedom as, 'would be on the other side of the earth, out of God's sight.' (Jasmine: p84) Their shared dream to start Vih & Wife. But unfortunately, he was killed in a bomb blast.

Jasmine wanted to fulfil her husband's dream and wanted to go America. On her way to America, she was raped by the captain of the ship, Half-Face. She didn't want to disrupt her mission. She killed Half-face. In rage she looked like, 'was walking death. Death incarnate.' (Jasmine: p119)

She met Professor Vadhera, who helped Prakash. Professor was not a professor but a hair seller. Lillian Gardon helped her. Jasmine tried to mock the culture of America. She wore T-shirts and pants. She stayed with Taylor and Wylie with their adopted son. Taylor called Jasmine 'Jase'. She played the role of a caregiver. After acquiring some financial freedom, she left them. She considered it to be a coward's act to "bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bulletproof vest." (Jasmine:p185)

With the help of Mother Ripplemeyer, she met Bud Ripplemeyer and her wife Karin. They had a child. She took care of the child. Bud called Jase as Jane. After Karin left, Bud wanted to marry Jane. She bore him a child. She observed, 'I have had a husband for each of the women I have been with. Prakash for Jasmine, Taylor for Jase, and Bud for Jane. Half-Face for Kali.' (Jasmine: p197).

Jasmine felt her transformation had been genetic. She left all of them went out 'greedy with wants and reckless from hope' (Jasmine:p241) Jasmine has undergone transformation gradually and she internalizes the new culture of America. R.S Pathak observes: 'Jasmine is an attempt to synthesize the essence of dual cultures, Indian and American.' 7

The Indian American diaspora writer Jhumpa Lahiri is the most acclaimed writer of the current times. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* probes into extremely delicate and heartbreaking emotions and issues. The protagonist in the novel *The Lowland* is Gauri. The story is also about two close brothers Subhash and Udayan. Udayan was attracted to Naxalite movement. He married Gauri. He lost his life in police attack. Gauri was pregnant by the time. Subhash married Gauri in spite of his mother's warning she is Udayan's wife, she will never love you, and his mother had told him. (*The Lowland*: p160). He took pity on them and took to America. Gauri gave birth to Bela, but was not able to love her. She left the family in pursuit of her career.

Alienation, acculturation, and assimilation are the major themes of the novel, *The Lowland*. Gauri was away from her parents most of her life. Her love for Udayan was true and she would not be able to bear the loss of him. She carried his child. She was unable to establish relationship with Subhash, in spite of marrying her, taken care of her and child Bela. She was constantly reminded of Udayan. She wanted 'to extinguish Udayan's ghost. To smoothen what haunted her.' (*The Lowland*: p161) She was unable to love her child either. She felt lonely, nostalgic and her stay 'was not bringing meaning to her life.' (*The Lowland*: p164) She left the family.

She wanted to change herself to assimilate in the new country. She cut her hair and changed her attire. She mocked the life style of Americans. Assimilation is the main goal of an immigrant's successful re-rooting in an alien land. Gauri struggled till the end to assimilate into the new culture, and was finally successful. Assimilation was possible because she was progressive in outlook and in outlook.

In this novel, the themes of brotherhood, motherhood, and womanhood are explored in their true perspectives. The strong ties of brotherhood between Shubash and Udayan; the motherly relation of Gauri to Bela; and Gauri as a woman, were explored. Jhumpa Lahiri's narration of psychological complexities, guilt, grief, are superb. She possesses great skill to handle events, persons, and situations of diasporic characters.

Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri works have provided extensive insights into diasporic elements. They deal with protagonists' expatriate sensibilities and their effort to overcome them. In the process, the characters were torn apart, rootless, and had a split psyche. Characters like Jasmine, Gauri were succeeded in assimilating to the new land.

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