

Review Article

# Cultural Identity and Feminist Vision in the Novels of Bharati Mukherjee

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural alienation is a global problem today. The huge difference between two ways of life results in a person getting depressed and frustrated. Bharati Mukherjee describes the American experience as one of 'fusion' and immigration a 'two way process' in which both the writer and the immigrants grow by the interchange and experience. In her novels 'The Tiger's Daughter' and 'Jasmine', Bharati Mukherjee has displayed a dual cultural shock.

**Key Words:** Fusion, Cultural, Alienation.

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural alienation is a global problem today. The huge difference between two ways of life results in a person getting depressed and frustrated. This can be termed as culture shock when a person moves away from his own culture and imbibes another; his old values come into clash with the new ones he finds. Bharati Mukherjee describes the American experience as one of 'fusion' and immigration a 'two way process' in which both the writer and the immigrants grow by the interchange and experience. In her novels 'The Tiger's Daughter' and 'Jasmine', Bharati Mukherjee has displayed a dual cultural shock. Jasmine and Tara move out of their respective native lands in order to realize their dreams. Their migration or 'cultural transplant' gives rise to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice. Bharati Mukherjee has deliberately avoided the

temptation of glorifying her native country and to degrade the adopted country, she has succeeded in presenting a fascinating study of the problem of a displaced person in America as well as in India. Jasmine moves out of India in search of the American dream while Tara plans a trip to India in search of the Indian dream. The object of their study is to present these two objective instances taken by Bharati Mukherjee and final disillusionment awaiting her protagonists.

Jasmine's fate had been predicted by an astrologer very early in life. He had predicted widow-hood and exile with the forewarning that nobody could run away from his or her fate. Her journey through life led Jasmine through many transformations Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane and Jone through large geographical locals like Punjab, Florida, New York, Iowa and finally towards California. At every stage of her life Jasmine revolts against her fate and the path drawn

for her. The narrative shifts between the past and present, between India of her earlier life and America of the present. The past is Jyoti's childhood in the small village of Punjab, her marriage to Prakash, the young ambitious city man, who always questions traditions. He has given her a new identity and new name Jasmine for she is small sweet and heady and would quicken the whole world with her perfume. The present is her life as Jane in Iowa where she is a live-in companion to Bud, a small town banker. Bud is captivated by her foreignness, but he never asks her about India. He courts her because she is alien. She is darkness and mystery. The American experience shocks Jane and fills her heart with disgust many a time. In the process of her transformation, Jane is chased by a desire to belong. She closely identifies herself with Bud's adopted son 'Du', a Vietnamese because he is an immigrant like herself. Both Du and Jasmine are in a hurry to become American. They try to forget the nightmares of their early lives. America, the Land of dreams, has many disillusion in store for her. William Gordon, a kind Quaker lady in Florida, offers her a home. The experience with the Professor's family turns out to be even more disturbing. The biggest shock to Jasmine is the truth of the Professor's means of earning a livelihood. He is not a professor but an importer and sorter of human hair. The next identity of Jane is thrust on her by the Hayse's family where she works as a 'care giver'. The twist given to the narrative where Jane falls in love with Taylor is a weak link in the chain of events. The transformation of Jyoti has come full circle.

Bharati Mukherjee supplements Jasmine's immigrant experience with similar experience learnt from Trinidad. While Jasmine cries her heart out every night because she is too proud to go back to her native country, Jane is shocked by the

switching of relationships in America. The final crisis comes when Jane is confronted with the souring of the American dream through the suicide of Durel. Du's departure from home in search of his family unnerves her. She is caught between her duty towards the cripple Bud and her love for Taylor. She makes the final choice. She doesn't feel guilty but relieved. She has stopped thinking of herself as Jane. She feels strong enough once again to cope with the situation in a realistic manner. Time would draw its own conclusion about her true identity.

'The Tiger's Daughter' also reflects the confrontation between illusion and reality. But the novelist has adopted the technique of documentation to bring out the contrast between two worlds and two cultures. An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes fond memories of it. Tara is packed off by her father at early age of fifteen for America because he is prompted by suspicion and pain about his country. Tara is homesick and even small things cause her pain. She prays to Kali for strength so that she would not break down before the Americans. New York is extraordinary and it has driven her to despair. Fate prompts her to fall in love with an American. Tara's husband David is painfully western and Tara is unable to communicate her family background and life in Calcutta. Her husband asks more questions about Indian customs and traditions. She feels completely insecure in an alien atmosphere.

After a gap of seven years, Tara returns to India for which she had dreamed about for years. She has come to believe that all hesitations and shadowy fears of the time abroad would disappear quite magically if she could return home to Calcutta. With the precision of a newspaper reporter, Bharati Mukherjee leads her heroine through a series of adventures to a final self realization and reconciliation. Tara's homesick eyes notice

many changes in the city of Calcutta. She feels outraged and is unable to respond to these changes. She yearns for the Bengal of Satyajit Roy, children running through cool green spaces, aristocrats despairing in music rooms of empty palaces. What confronts her is a restive city which compels weak men to fanatical defiance or dishonesty. Calcutta seems losing its memories in a bonfire of effigies, buses and trams. An appetite for the grotesque has taken over the city.

Many of Tara's doubts and conflicts are resolved by the strength, determination and quiet dignity of her parents. The visit to the Ashram of Mata Kannanbala Devi makes her share her love for her mother as well as the worshippers. The Indian dream is shattered but the writer leads the heroine to a final reconciliation. At the end of the novel, Tara is involved in a violent demonstration in which Jyoti Roy Choudhary, a symbol of the old world order is brutally beaten to death. Pranab, the youth tries to save him but is himself injured in the process. This is a course of history which cannot be stopped. Ultimately, Tara too is killed. The writer seems to suggest that Tara in her death finds oneness with the soil she belongs to.

Similarly, Dimple in 'Wife' and Tara, Padma and Parvati in 'Desirable Daughters' feel out of tune once they leave their motherland for an alien land. They are

unable to adjust themselves to an alien background and feel completely outraged. They struggle hard to preserve their identity and dignity in a land where hostile cultures and attitudes do not allow them to come into their own.<sup>3</sup> They get caught between two cultures making them feel unfit in both. Thus, 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 malice, charm, irony and sympathy. She pushes her heroines to the edges of their worlds and liberates them for a new world order. One can question whether being an immigrant has been a deterrent to Mukherjee's own country as she remains devoid of the stability afforded by one's roots. But it cannot be denied that hers is a voice which is worthy of the reader's attention and respect.

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