

Multicultural Dimension and Quest for New Identity in the Fictional World of  
Bharati Mukherjee with Special Reference to *Jasmine* and *Wife*

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**An Abstract**

This paper aims at picturizing the rapidly growing phenomenon of trans-nationalism and multiculturalism which demands an encounter with ‘newness’ and ‘new identity’ creating a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation, thereby renewing the past, refiguring it as contingent ‘in between’ space and innovating the performance of the present with a focus on Bharati Mukherjee’s transformational and multicultural phase due to her displacement from one place to the other making her feminine sensibility rather excruciating, bringing home the point that her novels like *Wife* and *Jasmine* chart the drama of entrance into a new land, new identity and new culture, adapting a new way of life, in personal, social and cultural perspectives, for which Tara in *The Tiger’s daughter*, Dimple in *Wife*, Jyoti as Jasmine in *Jasmine* are chose as female characters for immigrant experience with the new world and new culture with a quest for new identity.

**Keywords:** Culture, phenomenon, multiculturalism, identity transformation, interaction.

What is universally accepted and understood by all is that literature is created to refresh the weary, to console the sad, to hearten the dull and the downcast, to increase man’s interest in the world, his joy of living, and his sympathy in all sorts. It is a kind of intellectual light serving as both an interpretation of life and an expression of society, moulding the character and

personality of all in society. The culture and tradition of India have a distinct entity of their own, which would not allow them to lose their cultural identity. The present age is termed the age of the novel. We are living in a dynamic world that is fast changing. They are bound to change according to the forms of literature, techniques of creative writing, and even in the device of presentation. “Old order changes yielding place to new; last one good custom corrupts the world.” Whatever changes may take place, either in the form or in technique, the novelist is one who has to depend on human experience as the basis for the fiction. Whether it be in India, the United Kingdom, Russia or America, or any part of the globe, the truth is that man and his experience form the subject of any creative writer in fiction.

Cross-cultural interaction has become a significant ingredient of the Modern Movement after the First World War. It is said to have received a pronounced impetus with the writers coming closer to divergent cultural milieus through expatriation and, in some cases, even through deracination. The creative works of Indian writers born and brought up in the orthodox Hindu religion do demonstrate a qualitative difference in unraveling the ramifications of acculturation from those of their counterparts with other religious convictions. Bharati Mukherjee’s fictional writings invariably center on the complexities of cultural conflicts, where her characters attempt to live on their own terms.

Bharati Mukherjee, born on July 27, 1940, is an award-winning Indian-born American writer whose academic and professional career has won her many laurels. Twice she made use of Grants from McGill University, in 1968 and 1970, and won Canada Arts Council Grants twice, in 1973-74 and 1977. She was also awarded the prestigious Shastri-Indo Canadian Institute Grant during the year 1976-1977. Being a recipient of the Guggenheim Foundation Award in 1978-79 and Canadian Government Award in 1982, she also won the first prize from the Periodical Distribution Association in 1980 for her short story “Isolated Incidents.” Mukherjee has also been honored with the National Book Critics Circle Award for her short story collection, namely *The Middleman and Other Stories*, in 1989. She has to her credit the creation and publication of such notable works as *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), and *Desirable Daughters*.

Bharati Mukherjee’s novels and short-stories often reveal contemporary themes and concerns one of which is the emotional and psychic consequences of the search for self-identity.

Paying special attention to the condition of the Indian woman immigrant in North America, her novels do deliberately express the nomadic impulses of Indians who, in their deliberate search for a materially better life, migrate to the West and consequently face tensions of adaptation and assimilation. Mukherjee is at her best in the depiction of cross-cultural conflicts and multicultural dimensions. Her very first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, portrays Tara, a Western-educated, wealthy Bengali woman, as the one who returns home after having lived and married in America. With her changed and new outlook on life, she finds Calcutta disappointing and suffers from a sense of exile. After seven years, Tara returns alone to the Calcutta of her childhood: to the Bengali Tiger, her father, to the naive chatter of her old friends: "With a delicious combination of malice and charm, irony and sympathy, Bharati Mukherjee tells how Tara is pushed to the edges of her old world yet exiled from the new and how she tries to reconcile the two worlds in her heart"(P211.)

Her second novel *Wife* also deals with a Bengali woman Dimple Dasgupta from Calcutta, who is preoccupied with America. Dimple, the pliant, obedient daughter of middle-class Indian parents, is married off to Amit Basu, an ambitious engineer about to emigrate to the United States. Dimple finds adjustments to marriage more difficult than she expected, but the move to New York leaves her in a state of shock and finally despair. Contemplating ways to commit suicide, she is ultimately driven to a different kind of violence-murdering her husband. Her novel *Jasmine* is about a seventeen-year old widow who illegally enters the united states is raped on her first day in the land abroad, kills her rapist with ritual passion, goes on to become Jane Ripplemeyer, mate of Iowa banker Bud Ripplemeyer, and leaves him for her first American employer and lover, Taylor Hayes. Jasmine is initially unable to adopt American culture but soon adjusts herself to the new way of life. Her fourth novel *The Holder of the World* forges a link between the seventeenth-century Mughal Indian and the Contemporary Puritan American experience. Her *Desirable Daughters* is nothing but the picture of both traditional Brahmin Indian family and a contemporary American woman who has in many ways broken with the tradition but still remains tied to her native land. In the words of Swami Vivekananda,

"There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of woman is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing"

True to the words of Swami Vivekananda, there is no welfare of the society until the condition of women changes, because women are still the subject of man's violence. Nowadays Indian women are quite different from the traditional and shy women of ancient India. The reasons behind these changes are their freedom for education, less social boundaries and the liberty provided for them by their family. Even many women writers started expressing their feelings to society through their writing. There were many women writers who expressed the lives of immigrants in fiction. Bharati Mukherjee is one such writer who beautifully portrays the social reality of immigrant life in the American land, always focusing on the life and attitude of women, which changes due to cultural shock, domination, and conflicts faced by women in their lives in the alien land. Mukherjee's marriage to someone outside her culture changed her life and writing dramatically; she had moved to Canada with her husband, where she is said to have undergone racism and cultural alienation and aloofness. Almost like Mukherjee, her characters suffer do suffer because of immigration, finding it difficult to create an individual identity. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Bharati Mukherjee aptly stated thus:

“We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us have lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are placed by civil and religious conflicts... when we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must know about 200 years of American history and learn to adapt to American society”(P167)

Actually, in India, Women are expected by men to be traditional, following the ancestral values in their lives, but women want to lead a life full of freedom of their own choice. This specially made Bharati Mukherjee portrays the life of women, giving voice to the sufferings faced by them in their daily lives. She is found depicting the shifting, transforming, and changing attitude of her characters, like Dimple and Joyti, in her novels. In the novel *Jasmine*, Mukherjee portrays an Indian woman, Joyti. Born in a small town and migrated to America, she faces various adverse circumstances as an immigrant and tries to adjust and adapt the painful situation. Likewise, in the novel *Wife*, Dimple lives in a fantasy world where she faces obstacles, trying her best to overcome them by making a decision of her own. “Women are considered as properties, especially men's properties, in the male-dominated society. In the words of Dimple, “Marriage is the song of the road, and we should all sing it”(Wife 27). Dimple, as an Indian woman, is depicted as one who

does her feminine duty to subjugate her feelings and desires to the will of her husband in New York. She is hardly able to find her space within the confines of an alien culture. Bharati Mukherjee highlights here in this novel *Wife* the loss of sanity of Dimple as an attribute to her sense of alienation and aloofness from her own and American culture. The sense of her own subservience reiterates her marginality, which is further compounded by her continuing frustration in adjusting to her new culture, environment, new experience, thereby trying to create a new identity of her own. Here, Dimple's expatriate existence and experience in the United States enabled Mukherjee to interrogate Western feminism and its inadequacies so as to create a platform for Dimple to evolve the ways and means to find and search for a new identity in an alien culture.

Dimple and Amit, her husband, do not live happily because of their weak economic condition. Her husband's attitude and mannerisms begin to annoy her and make her lose contact with reality. She sees "sleeping bodies as corpses", her bed as a "humid coffin" and visualizes the streets as "badly healed scars on a giant body"(P97). Amit forbids her from taking up a job and wearing western clothes and tries to discourage her from becoming friendly with the hip Ina Mullick, the wife of Bijoy Mullick, who is a friend of Jyoti Sen. Ina, though an Indian living in America, initiates all bad American habits. She smokes, drinks, and has extra-marital relationships. Her careless husband has allowed her to become "more American than the Americans"(P68.) Dimple quickly learns that Amit sharply disapproves of women who go to college, wear pants, and smoke cigarettes:

"With so many Indians around and a television and child, a woman shouldn't have time to get any crazy ideas" (*Wife* 69)

Bharati Mukherjee inserts Ina Mullick into Dimple's life as a challenge to the limits of traditional wifehood. Amit obviously subscribes to the conservative ideology of women's imprisonment and seclusion. Yet he is resentful about being the sole bread-winner and reminds Dimple of her good fortune that she "stay home and do nothing better than looking after a husband"(*Wife* 101.). The critic Rajeshwar observes:

"Apart from effecting the abortion in Calcutta, all that Dimple could now do is to neurotically talk herself; irritate and nag Amit for no apparent reason, suffer from insomnia, entertain occasional sadistic feelings and actually try

sadism out on such harmless objects of beauty as a plastic flower. She thinks of her destruction of the flower at Sen's house as a narrow escape”(P105)

Fearing self-destruction, Dimple feels that she is “a star, collapsing inwardly”(P109.) Life stagnates while she spends all her time either sleeping or inately watching television and that is why she is yearning for a new identity in life. Dimple feels threatened by everything. Even objects of daily use assume sinister proportions in her overactive imagination. She loves the desire to live. As she cannot come to terms with either her own culture or America's culture, she finds herself at the crossroads and visualizes her life as a dying bonfire”(P119) and this leads her to her search for a new identity to the core. A profound 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. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* stands out as a unique fictional work by virtue of its insightful probing into its heroine's inner psyche and search for self-identity from a new outlook and attitude towards multicultural ways of living and entertaining with a new identity.

No doubt, Bharati Mukherjee's Indian sensibility is nothing but a synthesis of two cultures and Balachandra Rajan has rightly pointed out thus:

“.....the presence of two cultures in one's mind (turning inward) forms a wider andn therefore a saner basis which to originate the quest for identity and the discordance between two cultures can be creative.... The question to be answered whether the Indian tradition with its capacity for assimilation and its unique power of synthesis can come to terms with the new”(P164)

*Jasmine* by Mukherjee is an enactment of the encounter of two cultures, one ancient and the other modern, each illuminating and enriching the other. The Indian experience is reinterpreted through the Western idiom and this cultural and linguistic counterpoint leads to a “precision of words” in her fictional world. This is what Bharati Mukherjee has done in *Jasmine*. She has allowed her Indian protagonists to interact freely with ‘American Culture.’ Jasmine escapes the Indian ghetto in Flushing and adapts herself to the patterns of the dominant American culture. But that does not mean that she throws to the mind her race, her religion, her beliefs. As Bharati Mukherjee has said:

“I have difference of self, of existence and of morality than do writers like Malamud I believe that our souls can be reborn in another body. So the perspective I have in a single character’s life is different from that of American writer who believes that he has only one life”(Connell 19.)

The theme of *Jasmine* is an Indian immigrant’s encounter with the new world and her gradual transformation as she thoroughly imbibes the new culture. At the beginning of the novel, Mukherjee stresses the beliefs and superstitions, rituals and customs that are embedded in the Indian ethos. The protagonist Jasmine belongs to an impoverished family with fatalistic fears. But early in the novel, Jasmine tries to raise herself above such blind belief in fate. While scavenging for firewood, Jasmine gets a star-shaped wound on the forehead. That scar becomes her third eye and through an archetypal image, Bharati Mukherjee shows that already Jasmine has started peering out into invisible worlds. Jasmine’s transformation from Jyoti to Jane has its own scars and stresses; it is a long and painful process, hurtled through time tunnels, seen the worst and survived. After marriage to Prakash, she becomes a true wife in the Indian sense of the term, identifying her husband’s wishes with her own. Prakash’s ardent wish is to secure admission in some American Institute of Technology. They start dreaming of their life in America. Jyoti’s husband, Prakash, is killed by a terrorist. This renders Jasmine heartbroken and helpless. Jasmine’s first encounter with America is a kind of ‘regeneration through violence.’ She is raped by an ugly monster called Half-face in a remote Florida motel. Being robbed of her chastity, she tries to kill herself. But at this very juncture, she discovers her inner urge to live. She cuts her tongue and blood oozes out of it. Now she becomes a perfect vengeful image of Goddess Kali, ready to kill the monster- she stabs him. Now she moves ahead, knowing not what the future holds, in its store for her. When she falls desperately in love with Taylor, she knows she has to make a clean break with her past- a repeatedly raped woman and a murderer and she goes to Else county, Iowa to live with Bud, the banker and his mother and their adopted child, a Vietnamese-American. But since what she feels for at the end of the novel, Taylor and Duff come for her, the final parting from Bud is inevitable. The interaction between two cultures is seen in the way Jasmine tries to explain to Taylor her father’s mission in life in terms of Hindu philosophy and Taylor’s matter-of-fact Western reaction to it. Jasmine’s Indian sensibility is quick to catch the contrast between two cultures. This comes out forcibly. The predicament of an Indian widow and an American widow is clearly brought out by the author. In fact, her quest for identity is something unique in terms of

Indian sensibility. Jasmine voices the dilemma of an uprooted creature deciding to live for herself and leaves the 'old world dutifulness', besides demonstrating the American spirit of freedom(P241.) Even if there are occasional cultural shocks, Jasmine does find a new identity in America. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee pushes her heroines to the edges of their worlds and liberates them for a new world order with a profound search for a new identity, even if multi-cultural layers hang over them.

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