
Transcending Cultural Boundaries: The Fluid and Liberated Identity of Bharati Mukherjee's Women Characters

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Abstract:

The female diasporic characters in Bharati Mukherjee's oeuvre transcend patriarchal constraints and repudiate any form of identity 'hyphenation' to embrace an autonomous identity. For them, traversing the border represents liberation from all forms of oppression. She has expressed her aesthetic perspective on identity reforms facilitated by the diaspora and its contexts. An attempt has been made through this paper to highlight a progression from "unhousement" to "rehousement" by emphasising on fluidity of identity. In the writings of Mukherjee, we witness a multicultural mosaic of immigrant characters who come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Converging in America, these female immigrants intermix and promote a new kind of culture and broaden their horizons. Thus they have become what Bharati Mukherjee has called "conquerors"

Keywords: Boundaries, Hyphenation, Embrace, Multiculturalism, Hybridity

Introduction

The female diasporic characters in Bharati Mukherjee's oeuvre transcend patriarchal constraints and repudiate any form of identity 'hyphenation' to embrace an autonomous identity. For them, traversing the border represents liberation from all forms of oppression. She has expressed her aesthetic perspective on identity reforms facilitated by the diaspora and its contexts, highlighting a progression from "unhousement" to "rehousement," a process that underscores a detachment from the culture of one's birth, where one's societal position was guaranteed.

Mukherjee asserts that her "experience of racism in Canada is primarily responsible for an attitude of expatriate in her early works" (Darkness XIV). She contends that she was never regarded as a cultural citizen because of her skin colour, a significant indicator of her visibility as a non-European immigrant. Mukherjee contends that Canadian multiculturalism, indicative of the nation's dedication to cultural plurality via accommodation, failed to grant

cultural citizenship to all citizens of Canada. She contends that the principles of liberal multiculturalism merely serve to reinforce division and marginalize individuals not acknowledged as part of the prevailing culture.

The 1985 terrorist attack on the Air India plane, resulting in the deaths of all 300 passengers, predominantly Canadians of South Asian descent, exemplifies Canada's failure of multiculturalism, as documented by Mukherjee in her non-fiction work, 'The Sorrow and the Terror.' Mukherjee posits that Canadian multiculturalism is founded on the perception of cultures as static and mutually exclusive. This notion rejects the existence of hybridity by asserting superficial pluralism and maintaining the belief in distinct cultural boundaries.

Bhabha elaborates: "Multicultural policy entertains and encourages cultural diversity, while correspondingly containing it. A transparent or dominant culture says that these other cultures are fine, but we must be able to locate them within our own grid." (Bhabha 208)

Mukherjee contends in "American Dreamer" that "one's biological identity may not be one's only identity. Erosions and accretions come with the act of emigration" (Mukherjee 4). "The World According to HSU" in *Darkness* and "Orbiting" in *Middleman and Other Stories* illustrate how diaspora narratives contest the prevailing paradigms of Canadian and American multiculturalism by implicitly advocating for a more fluid or provisional framework for the formation of cultural and national identities.

Struggles of Female Diasporic Characters

In the short story 'Orbiting' collected in 'The Middleman and Other Stories', Renata makes use of thanksgiving ceremony in the story which is a quintessentially American ritual, to dismantle settled notions about what constitutes "American": "A yearly event that brings together members of the de Marcos family, this year's Thanksgiving dinner gives cause for apprehension to Renata, who plans to introduce her family to her new boyfriend, a political refugee from the civil war in Afghanistan. Renata's fervent hope is that her family, whom she considers "very American" in their cultural values and attitudes will more tolerate him." (Mukherjee 63)

Renata distances herself from her traditional upbringing and redefines her identity by changing her name from Rita to Renata. By embracing a self-fashioned life, she lives on her own. In an attempt to heal from the pain of her break-up, she chooses a relationship with Ro who is an Afghan refugee. Sushma Tandon, in her book 'Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective' asserts that in 'The Middleman and Other Stories', the characters "shed their racial, religious, and cultural prejudices and promote a real integration among themselves" (Tandon 109).

Miss Supariwala, in "Isolated Incidents," is a strong and capable 43-year-old woman with advanced degrees from Western Ontario and Bombay. She believes that she has been passed over in job interviews for less qualified candidates. She is a Canadian citizen. She has written several articles and received multiple research grants. No one could find fault with her being on time, her self-control, or her preparedness. Leela Lahiri in "Hindus" shows how women migrants adapt to a new culture while trying to fit in. In her first month in America, she drops the "h" from her old name "Leelah," changing it to the American version "Leela." Even though she belongs to a Bengali Brahmin family, she breaks traditional caste rules by marrying an American named Derek. As Nagendra Kumar aptly asserts, "She neither complains against India nor finds Indianness as a barrier in her adjustment." (Kumar 67)

It is discovered that Leela and her husband, Derek, are no longer together. Being by herself gives her a new sense of confidence and a new way of looking at things. She opines, "In two years, I have tried to treat the city not as an island of dark immigrants, but as a vast sea in which new Americans like me could disappear and resurface at will. I did not seek them out." (Mukherjee 136). Leela is aware that she would be identified as a divorced woman who was married to a white man at a large dinner at Patels. She has fully integrated herself into her new country and has nearly distanced herself from her past by adopting a new accent and wearing Western-style clothing.

In a brief period of two years, she endeavours to "treat the city (New York) not as a vast sea in which new Americans like me could disappear and resurface at will" (Darkness 136). Her inclination to pursue her desires will facilitate her regeneration in a new realm. Despite her awareness of her Indian heritage, she confidently asserts, "I am an American Citizen" (Mukherjee 133). Consequently, Leela embodies a hybrid identity that permits no cultural obstacles in her pursuit of cultural assimilation and freedom.

In the narrative "Angela," an orphaned girl from Dhaka, adopted by the Brandons in the USA, seeks to integrate into the American future by relinquishing her painful recollections of wartime atrocities. Reflecting on her past in contrast to the present, Angela contemplates: "I am Angela the Angel. Angela was Sister Stella's name for me. The name I was born with is lost time, the past is lost to me. I must have seen a lot of wickedness when I was six, but now I can't remember any of it. The rapes, the dogs chewing on dead bodies, the soldiers. Nothing." (Mukherjee 13)

Diasporic Female Characters as Conquerors

Angela substantiates Spivak's assertion that "the putative centre welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order to better exclude the margin." Consequently, Angela refutes her marginal status, perceiving herself as a member of the Iowan family. She relinquishes her Bangladeshi name and embraces an American name that reflects her culture and lifestyle. She has also come to appreciate the Sunday pork roast, as "the pigs are not the filthy creatures here as they are back home" (Mukherjee 14). Angela harbours no desire for her harsh past. At the age of six, she experienced traumatic events, including the biting off

of her nipples, the presence of dogs on decaying infant bodies, and soldiers wielding bayonets, all of which cultivated a rebellious spirit within her.

She resists by preventing her past from influencing the immigrant within her who perpetually aspires for a more promising future. Nafeesa Hafeez, in "The Lady from Lucknow," subverts patriarchal norms by engaging in adultery during her husband's absence. As the spouse of an ambitious workaholic, she feels neglected and recognizes that her fervent desires remain unfulfilled.

To achieve her American dream, she initiates a romantic relationship with James Beamish, a sixty-five-year-old Caucasian man who enhances her sense of beauty. Nagendra Kumar in his book 'The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective' rightly notes, "Her liaison with Beamish is not only an attempt to express her independence and individuality, but it also gives her an illusion that by carrying on an illicit affair she is somehow identifying herself with America" (Kumar 71).

In "Visitor," Vinita is an Indian woman who marries Sainen Kumar and embarks on a new life with him. In his pursuit of greater Americanization, he has entirely alienated his wife. Vinita resolves to escape her confining environment and integrate into the adopted culture. By transcending the conventional constraints of an Indian wife, she permits Rajiv certain liberties. Rajiv acts as a conduit for her to access the American realm of liberty, individuality, and fervour.

In the stories of Mukherjee, we witness a multicultural mosaic of immigrant characters who come from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Converging in America, these immigrants intermix and promote a new kind of culture. The wife Panna Bhatt says in 'A Wife's Story', "I broadened my horizons"(Mukherjee 31). Similarly, the rest of the immigrants too have broadened their horizons to become "conquerors".

The narrative illustrates the perils faced by immigrant women in the host land, conveying the inherent message that only those possessing determination and mental fortitude can seize opportunities amidst the chaos. A Wife's Story provides a compelling portrayal of the cultural assimilation that an Indian woman undergoes. The protagonist, Mrs Panna Bhatt, journeys to America to obtain a PhD, leaving her husband in India. She is a resilient individual and a skilled adapter who can uncover the true meaning of her existence by "refashioning" herself according to the expectations of her adopted homeland.

She understands that to thrive in a foreign land, she must transcend taboos and depart from the limitations of a conventional Indian wife archetype. Panna has acclimated to the social and cultural environment of the new land to such an extent that she feels "light"—nearly liberated. She is aware of her accomplishment, which markedly contrasts with those of her mother and grandmother. She recognizes that she has accomplished something

significant beyond her passive existence as an Indian wife. Her decision to remain abroad, due to the incomplete status of her course, exemplifies her assimilation.

Anne Brewster in her article 'A Critique of Bharati Mukherjee's Neo-nationalism', states that Bharati Mukherjee's works on immigrants in America place them as "exemplars of hegemonic nationalism". They are not on the margins of mainstream culture. They represent the voice of asserting a neo-nationalism. According to Brewster, " Mukherjee's discourse of nationalism is articulated from two sides. In her fiction, she constructs stories about American entry into the culture of immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, for the most part, Indian. In addition, she constructs a personal mythology of immigration and assimilation in numerous autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical writings (which take the generic form of non-fiction, interviews, essays and articles, the latter often comprising readings of her own fiction.)"(ReadingRoom/litserve/SPAN/34/Brewster.html).

In "Jasmine," a young Indian woman from Trinidad travels to Detroit by clandestinely crossing the border illegally in a van filled with mattresses and box springs. Jasmine was exceptionally resilient and resolute, demonstrating her willingness to work even on Sunday mornings. She assisted in unloading packing crates of Caribbean spices at a store on the adjacent block. She successfully obtained a position as a mother's helper with a professor's family in Ann Arbor. The protagonist of Jasmine epitomizes Mukherjee's characters, undergoing a profound experience of immigration through assimilation into American culture.

In "Jasmine," Mukherjee exemplifies the diaspora of belonging through the protagonist's transformation from a victim to a voyager, who asserts, "We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (Mukherjee 25). Jasmine is willing to reinvent herself by surpassing her origins. In "Jasmine," Mukherjee celebrates the concept of assimilation and advocates for the cessation of unproductive nostalgic attachments to the past, urging a courageous embrace of the adopted homeland.

Mukherjee articulates her migrant aesthetics: "I write about what obsesses me- the rehousement of individuals and whole people... Unhousement is the breaking away from the culture into which one was born and in which one's place in society was assured. Rehousement is the re-rooting of oneself in a new culture. This requires transformations of the self." (Hancock 38-39)

In 'Desirable Daughters', Tara recognizes that living in the past, whether temporally or spatially or both is dangerous to the development of one's identity. She keeps on changing and evolving, but at the same time does not lose the identities she once possessed. Instead of transplanting Indian culture or disposing of it altogether, she tries to assimilate her Indianness by reinventing her identity as experiences forever keep on moulding it into something new. Through Tara's fluid identity, Mukherjee seems to agree with Stuart Hall's views that the

diaspora experience as I intend here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.

Stuart Hall’s assertion is well -founded, “The diaspora experience as I intend here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of “identity” which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.” (Hall 401 -402)

‘Miss New India’ presents the idea that the adoption of American culture is the need of the hour. The setting of the novel is in India, but American culture has an important role to play. Anjali Basu, who was raped by the man whom her parents have chosen as her husband heads to Bangalore with the help of her American teacher Peter Champion. Peter motivated her to have a brighter future in India’s IT capital, where she is taught how to handle irate call centre customers and how to neutralize her accent. She adopts American music and slang for herself and assimilates well into the urban culture of Bangalore.

Conclusion

Speaking about the triumphs of immigrant characters, Mukherjee said in her interview: “I don’t think about my fiction as being about alienation. On the contrary, I mean for it to be about assimilation. My stories centre on a new breed and generation of North American pioneers. I am fascinated by the people who have enough gumption, energy, and ambition to pull up their roots. My stories are irreverent and I like to think, funny. My stories are about conquests and not about loss.”(Hancock 17)

Mukherjee's narrative suggests the engagement of strong female immigrant characters with the exchanges, crossings, and complex identification "routes" set by the diaspora. These characters appear as “conquerors” who come to live in the host land and embrace a self-fashioned life. Mukherjee also suggests that it is the American melting pot where different communities in a nation are conceived as coming together to create a new "American" culture. As Mukherjee herself asserts, “I write about New Americans and New Canadians, about belated home steads from nontraditional countries. My characters grow and change with the change in citizenship” (Hancock 12).

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