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The Chaos of the Melting Pot: Multiculturalism in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction

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Bharati Mukherjee has distinguished herself among the ground-breaking novelists in the genre of diasporic Indian literature. Her account of the experience of the diaspora and its effect upon women provide the readers with an insight into the lives of South-Asians who currently reside in the United States.

This paper aims to study how Bharati Mukherjee has captured the chaos of the Melting Pot about the Indian immigrant experiences in America in her short stories and novels. The longing for the security of home and comfort of their own culture creates a conflict known only to those born in the third world, burdened with the choice of living in the West. While changing citizenship is easy, swapping culture is not.

Multiculturalism is a theme that echoes throughout Mukherjee's work. Multiculturalism is a policy that emphasizes the unique characteristics of different cultures in the world. It is a public policy approach for managing cultural diversity in a multiethnic society, officially stressing mutual respect and tolerance for cultural differences within a country's borders.

In recent debates about multiculturalism, Mukherjee has hewn to a middle course. On the one hand, she resists a cultural balkanization in which every ethnic group stakes out its own turf and denies common bonds or a common American identity. On the other hand, she rejects the metaphor of the Melting Pot, with its idea that ethnic minorities should dissolve their identities into the Euro-American broth.

Mukherjee is not interested in the nostalgic aspects of preservation of cultures, the hallowing of tradition, obligations to the past. Her characters undergo personal changes in their movements from culture to culture. Her protagonists face a multi-cultural society and exhibit a deep awareness of the social reality surrounding them. The multi-cultural ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life but not a complete breakup with the past. Mukherjee writes about the experiences and life-styles of human beings who suffer from a cultural dichotomy and rootlessness.

Cultural alienation is a world phenomenon today. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another, his old values come into conflict with the new ones. Mukherjee creates a world in which cultural encounter instead of simply leading to clashes, misunderstanding and confusion changes to an acceptance of the difference where cross-culturality becomes the termination point.

'Acculturation' or adoption of changes in external behavior begins early enough but 'assimilation' or the ability to react instinctively and emotionally to a culture is a far slower process. Assimilation is the first step to connect with the new place.

Adrienne Rich presents her assimilation theory :

“To assimilate means to give up not only your history, but your body, to try to adopt an alien appearance because your own is not good enough, to fear naming yourself lest name be twisted into label.” (Rich 142).

Assimilation is not the destruction of one’s true identity. On the contrary, it is about the great intermingling of cultural influence that comprises the American condition. Mukherjee prefers to use the word “mongrelization” to describe precisely the process of fusion and two-way transformation that she dramatizes in her fiction, especially in novels like *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. Mongrelization suggests a spontaneous, spirited union of disparate entities. Mukherjee cheerfully embraces “cultural and psychological mongrelization.”

Mukherjee posits a glimpse into a future world where a newly amalgamated population of Americans can exist, a global fusion of many selves and many cultures. She emphasizes the need to meld or blend cultures. She disputes the outdated concept of America as “melting pot” which connotes a loss of the old self and the creation of a new self, and wishes to supplant the idea with what she calls the idea of the “fusion chamber”, in which the American (or receiving) culture is simultaneously affected and effected in new ways by the infusion of immigrants.

Mukherjee’s characters demonstrate the energy, vitalism and resilience necessary to undergo successfully what must be undergone in order to survive and transmute culture in a twentieth century global reality. As she has stated in a interview, Mukherjee sees the influx of immigrants as an invigorating and shaping influence on American life :

“We have come not to passively accommodate ourselves to someone else’s dream of what we should be, we have come in a way, to take over, to help build a culture.” (Hogan).

She dramatizes the conflict between the immigrants’ old belief systems and the New World ethos, and lends an artistic voice to their experiences of trauma and triumph.

She says about the immigrants in her article :

“They have all shed past lives and languages, and have traveled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again.” (Mukherjee 28).

Her stories explore the ways in which we, who are exposed to many cultures in the age of globalization and information technology, combine our many heritages into a new singular whole.

Mukherjee’s novel *The Tiger’s Daughter* addresses Tara’s difficulties of being caught between two world, homes and cultures and is an examination of who she is and where she belongs. Tara realized after living 7 years in America, she had forgotten many of her Hindu rituals of worshipping which she had learned since childhood :

“But she could not remember the next step of the ritual. It was not a simple loss, Tara feared, this forgetting of prescribed actions, it was a little death, a hardening of the heart, a cracking of axis and center.” (Mukherjee 51).

The phrase ‘cracking of axis and center’ symbolically points out the psyche of Tara which has come in her due to the loss of her own cultural heritage.

“She is totally convinced by these experiences that she needs to discard her past and embrace her home away from home.” (Bose 51).

In the novel *Jasmine*, for assimilation in America, Jasmine says :

“Let go just one thing like not wearing our normal clothes, or a turban or not wearing the tikka on the forehead – the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole.” (Mukherjee 29).

For Jasmine, it is the willingness to accept the new culture that makes the process of acculturation easy. Jasmine exhibits a resilience that is capable of adapting to every changed situation. Jasmine feels :

“America may be fluid and built on flimsy, invisible lines of weak gravity, but I was a dense object, I had landed and was getting rooted.” (Mukherjee 179).

It is the willingness of Mukherjee’s ethnic characters to murder their past selves that enables them to actively advance into unknown but promising futures. The futures they propel themselves toward — and even help to shape — are not guaranteed to be successful, but have the potential for personal, material and spiritual success. By contrast, those of her characters who hold on to history, the past and their past places in their cultures simply for the sake of maintaining its traditions are doomed to failure, stresses and often death.

Mukherjee has presented a true picture of the problems of the clash of cultures and adjustments faced by an immigrant in an alien land. She recommends that one should forget his past and try to become a part of the new place by adopting their lifestyle and culture with an open mind. One’s determination and willingness to transform and adjust can make his or her assimilation easier.

This current issue of multiculturalism is a burning problem of society since the number of people who are migrating to new places is increasing enormously day by day. As Mukherjee has gone through all this herself, she is more convincing in her writing than other writers of our times. People can easily identify with her works. Her literature and the portrayal of the present scenario are very realistic and can capture the spirit and the heart of the modern man.

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