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Cross Cultural Confrontations in the Writings of Bharati Mukherjee

Dr. Vinita Singh Chawdhry

Professor,

Govt. Hamidia Arts & Commerce College, Bhopal

&

Meenakshi Bhadra

Research Scholar

Abstract:

The continuity of cultural environment as well as natural environment has been interrupted by the increased mobility of people in this modern era. One of the major stress of today's world is migration. This stress has been developed by the expatriate experience resulting from the breakup of traditional societies that in turn brings about a change in the ethos and man's psyche. Bharati Mukherjee is one of the famous writers who has carved out a niche for herself within a comparatively short span of time. Her writings emphasise the need for immigrants to choose their home and culture by constantly adjusting themselves to the newly adopted nation and by maintaining their relationship with the old native land and its culture. Mukherjee's novel presents the cross cultural situation of the women characters. It narrates the challenges faced by them in the alien land that transform them according to the situation, to assert their self identity. The given paper deals with the homogenous issues of cross cultural confrontation and its impact in the works of Bharati Mukherjee.

Keywords: Cultural conflict, Hybridity, Dislocation, Multiculturalism, Ethnicity

The human species was never fully satisfied with the natural things and started adapting the unnatural things. The malleable nature of humans gave rise to culture and the family issues of nature - nurture is raised by the malleability factor. The nature-nurture pushes an individual into an agonised condition that makes her succumb to a neurotic disposition. The discord takes place due to the cross cultural quandary. Migration makes the cultural concept more complex as the migrants have several cultures and acculturation brings more complication in the adjustment of the new culture with the old one. Cross Cultural conflict can be expressed as the conflict that takes place between the individuals or social groups which are separated by cultural boundaries. Kevin Avruch in his article writes:

The more complex and differentiated the society the more numerous are potential groupings. Each of these groups is a potential container for culture, and thus any complex society is likely to be made up various subcultures, that is of individuals who, by virtue of overlapping and multiple group memberships, are themselves multicultural.
(12)

The globalization of the world economy has paved way to offshoot of multiculturalism and intercultural interaction. In ancient period, western culture was confined to a certain area and territory, it was not so widely spread as we can see in the present world. The culture of east also flourished within a limited area with hardly any possibility of mutual exchange between them. With the passage of time, many travellers and adventurers explored from the Western land to the East discovering the Eastern culture and civilization. This paved way to enhancement of interaction and mutual exchange of cultures.

Every culture has its own peculiarities and predilections. There exists a very close relation between culture and religion. Religion is the basis of differentiation of culture of people. It is religion which makes people culturally different from each other. Culture and religion are complementary to each other. Culture can be broadly classified as culture of the individual, culture of a group, class or a society as a whole. Eliot says, "The culture of the individual is dependent upon ... society to which that group or class belongs. Therefore, it is the culture of the society that is fundamental" (120). Cross Cultural predicament can occur at different levels and becomes more severe when the individual's mindset is rooted in a particular culture. Thus, culture is the framework of contexts in which conflicts take place. Cross cultural confrontation has gained momentum with the advent of the Twentieth century. With increased multiculturalism, people started migrating to different countries to fulfill their ambitions and dreams. Many Asians, particularly Indians, started migrating to the U.S.A after the liberalized 1965 immigration act. The Indian immigrants who migrated to America are middle class, educated and even professionals who entered into a completely different opportunity structure. This trend has given rise to the development of intercultural and interracial awareness.

Many post colonial women writers like Sashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Bharati Mukherjee takes interest in writing within the margins of indigenous culture. Mukherjee is one of the writers, who confront the issues of nebulous culture and social space in her writings. Culture is something which is closely related to the people. Culture, the word refers "to the beliefs, rituals, practices of a given social or ethnic group or nation" (Habib 172). When immigrants confront another culture, there arises a cross-cultural consciousness in them in terms which leads to enrichment of their social and cultural experiences. It also makes them bewildered in case they fail to cope up with the cultural shock.

Mukherjee has achieved an enviable position within a comparatively short creative span. As she was an expatriate in U.S.A, her experience of expatriation leads her to capture evocatively the experience of Indian immigrant in her writings. Her works explore the theme of immigration and transformation. Her immigrants are shown with a common aim to become permanent citizens of America, where they adjust to the new culture and transform themselves by entering the different phases of their journey of migration. Mukherjee's writings reveal her as well as her female immigrants embattlement with culture, ethos and people of the country where they are born and the new land of immigration, that is America.

The quality of cultural conflict in her fiction leads to psychological crises in all its multiplicity. Her writings detect the cultural clash between the East and the West leading to psychological crises in the inner mind of her protagonists. Her writings show the curiosity of her protagonists concerning their survival in the new surroundings. Mukherjee focuses upon the sensitive protagonists who lack cultural and personal identity.

One of the eminent theme of the modern literature is the depiction of cross cultural crises, a subject which has acquired a great significance in the present world. Most of the novels and writings of Mukherjee highlights the immigrant anxiety and their problems and trauma arising due to cultural clash. No immigrant including men or women escapes the cultural conflicts, they all surrender to it and become its victims. The process of transplantation from one culture into another proves painful for the female immigrants. Her works show the transformation of female protagonists, where she tries to vivify the image of her women protagonists, who put their efforts to accept changed identity by overthrowing their original culture heritage aside and tried to assimilate in the alien culture.

The novel *The Holder of The World* shows a different approach of conflict between two different cultures. As a result Transformation takes place when two different cultures come in contact with each other and "people are continually remarking their culture, and in so doing redefining the past, reconstituting the present, and reconceptualizing what they desire from the future" (Long 202). In *The Holder of The World*, Mukherjee has explored the consequences of cultural confrontation by showing an intermingling of the puritan seventeenth century and early eighteenth century American culture in contemporary Mughal India. It shows Mukherjee's approach to cross cultural consciousness attaining a universal relevance and promoting a sense of global connectedness. The novel is an attempt made by Mukherjee where she shows her protagonist imbibed in its new culture. According to Laxmi,

The Holder of The World succeeds in introducing a set of new elements in Mukherjee's cross cultural vision. She communicates through it a new kind of global consciousness that provides a sense of connectedness beyond the barriers of time and geography. (201).

Mukherjee's writings are largely reflected by her own experiences that she encounters as a woman immigrant who was caught between two cultures. Her fiction world represents a pathetic scenario of women immigrants, their struggle, trauma and cultural psychological conflicts. The analysis of Mukherjee's novel demonstrates that she addressed herself to all the issues related to expatriate experience. Her women characters turn victims of cultural conflict due to discrimination of culture. In the post colonial era, the different classes of people moved out of their culture and there was so much mixing that it gave birth to hybrid culture.

Mukherjee's creative work is the manifestation of the immigrant experience through the cultural point of view. Writers like Mukherjee has treated the subject of cross

cultural phenomena most intensely and extensively. Mukherjee, herself settled down in Canada and faced the problem of multiculturalism and later on moved to America and took its citizenship. Her exposure to western culture broadened her attitude. Changing of nations eventually made her resilient and more tolerant and adaptable to different kinds of situations in a new land. Mukherjee's fiction shows the temperament and mood of the present society of America. Mukherjee has written about the devastating effects of racism and transformation in cultural terms. Mukherjee's *Wife* depicts the conflict between the protagonist's drive towards self recreation. The novel shows the position of Dimple as a wife who becomes a member of a small Indian immigrant community in New York, where she later on faces physical isolation. Dimple's association of her freedom with her marriage and America shows Mukherjee's investment in her immigrant characters with self excluding attitude. It shows a desire to get socially and culturally isolated from America, even when it proves to be a better future for them. Dimple's life becomes vulnerable, as her husband is not able to fulfil her dreams when media becomes the mode that fills her with violence.

Dimple, the protagonist not only contemplates violence and killing on the television and radio between their unknown, fear within her evokes her to kill her husband. Dimple muses "Life should have treated her better, should have added and subtracted in different proportions so that she was not left with a chimera." (156). She kills her husband Amit by stabbing him and sets herself free from the bondage of marriage. She again tries to find an identity in America by engaging herself in an illicit relationship with Milt. Thus, the cross cultural confrontation intensifies her confusion and turns the violence inside out and she ends up by killing her own husband.

Mukherjee's *Jasmine* shows the enactment of the encounter of two cultures, where one culture is ethnic while another culture is modern and each of them enriching and illuminating the other. Jasmine breaks the shackles of the cast, family and gender. She learns to live for herself. She receives a new identity through her past culture. The experience of women immigrants is completely different from the men. A woman's journey is in search of love, happiness and freedom. A woman can adapt herself to any culture or many different cultures as she is more prone to discrimination and marginalization since her birth. Jyoti transforms into Jasmine when she marries a modern city man, Prakash. Her migration to the United States means freedom and liberation from the clutches of the patriarchal society. Jasmine's Indian values and sensibility allow her to catch the contrast between two different cultures. Here the confrontation of East and West proceeds in a progressive manner. Jasmine ceases to be an Indian and becomes an American in terms of culture. She becomes the nodal point where the two cultures of India and America meets. The novel represents the cultural confrontation as a positive move for the immigrant Jasmine, where she reveals against the odd superstitions and traditions in spite of all adversities against her. She gets successfully assimilated into the American society. She changes herself in order to get adjusted to the

environment and the world around her. Thus, Jasmine is one of the Mukherjee's models who undergoes cross cultural conflict and lastly assimilate into the new culture.

Mukherjee, who herself experienced the exuberance of immigration, confronted two different cultures with its peculiarities, considers assimilation as an ideal solution for the immigrants. The marginal situation that Mukherjee faced being an immigrant is exhibited by her characters like Jasmine and Dimple. They faced the same nostalgia in their initial stages of expatriation in the new world. These protagonists of Mukherjee carved a niche for themselves in the most adverse circumstances, where adaptation and assimilation is not considered as an easy process to attain and wearies most of the immigrants down into aggressiveness and violence. Mukherjee's novel is the outcome of cultural alienation. The tremendous difference between two different lands, its culture and lifestyle leads an immigrant to the state of shock. Whenever an immigrant enters into a state of new cultural values by leaving the old ones, her old values and ethos comes in conflict with the new culture. Thus, immigration not only leads to cultural conflict, but also affect the personal and social life of the immigrants. One of the major resultant of cross cultural conflict is identity crises. Mukherjee's novels, short stories elaborate the multicultural conflicts arising in the American societies. It shows the issues of families, who struggle to maintain their old lifestyle, they were accustomed to. Mukherjee's, *A Father* shows the culturally diverse issues of the father's incessant need to preserve the culture and beliefs of his homeland. There exists a cultural clash between his ethnic belief and the modern culture and lifestyle of his wife and daughter.

The psyche of an immigrant is always tragic and tension is created in the mind due to the difference between the two socio-cultural environment, as a result they are filled with the feeling of rootlessness. The immigrants have to struggle for their physical, mental and psychological survival in an alien nation. Diaspora has always been considered as a dilemma of two cultures. The diaspora of the first generation always exists an affinity with the native culture, while the second generation mostly shows the deviation from the native roots. Most of the characters of Mukherjee were found to engage in quest of their identity in the alien milieu. It was not easy for them to adapt the foreign culture.

The female immigrants seek marriage as it was the easiest way to get assimilated into a new culture. Marriage also provided them an opportunity to come out of their fear of loosing their identity and paved way for them to intermingle with the foreign culture. Thus, in the process of cultural encounter Mukherjee's most of the protagonists succeeded to fight the war of imbalance, difference and discrimination faced by them in the new nation America. They attained the height of a balance by adjusting with their new land and its culture. The immigrants lived in the world of two cultures, completely displaced with a divided identity, still attempted to reconcile cross-cultural identities. The confluences of the East with the West are not only complicated for the Asians, but also for the Britishers. Mukherjee's characters are shown with marginalized dislocation and they attempt to bridge

the gap between the two generations as well as totally different cultures. Thus, Mukherjee presents the cross cultural confrontation in her novels by showing her female characters struggle to adjust themselves in the new cultural space where they have to adjust with the manners, food, homelessness, memory and longing. The protagonists therefore, adopt various strategies to cope up as well as survive in the new land.

Mukherjee's *Tiger's Daughter* is a very fine manifestation of cultural conflict, faced by the immigrants. The novel gives the illustration of the uprooted condition of the protagonist, Tara, who is married to an American. After seven years, when she returns to her native place Calcutta to locate her cultural roots and her inherited identity, she finds herself a total stranger in the inherited milieu. She discovered that she neither belongs to India nor to America. She gets caught between the two cultures, ideologies and the way of life.

Tara, the protagonist is caught in the gulf between the two nations, feels that she has forgotten many of the Hindu rituals of worshipping that her mother had been performing since her childhood. She considered it as a big loss. The cross cultural confrontation leads to the psychological change in Tara. Although she was wrapped in American culture from outside, but her inner core of heart was filled with an intense desire of an ordinary Indian. The attainment of both the cultures together made her rootless. Now she started seeing everything with an American eye and her American Indian point of view is expressed as,

Tara feels herself, as misfit everywhere she goes. She is forced to look at her inner world Consisting of two cultures and two different ideologies which are two worlds apart. Realizing that the reconciliation is impossible, Tara feels to go back to David" (quoted in Sharma 70)

Jasmine is a story where cross cultural confrontation leads to the reinvention of identity. Jasmine, an immigrant from the third world who moves to the U.S.A, gets pushed from one disaster to another. She is not a tragic character, but she appears as someone who is determined to explore ample of opportunities for herself and change her destiny. She passes through physical, mental and emotional agony that drives her towards violence. Tara's journey begins from New York and finally ended in California. She reinvents herself with every move she takes, her reinvention process is marked with a new name Jyoti, Jasmine, Jane etc. With each new name she moves closer to her dream of being in America. She not only encounters two different cultures, but also lives several lives in a single life. The life of immigrants is in fact a series of reincarnations. Mukherjee, who subjects her heroine to multiple codes of society provides the message, that one needs to be flexibly assimilated into the mainstream culture of the newly adopted nation by forgetting the past.

Mukherjee's literary oeuvre is engrossed with cross cultural conflicts. Her writings give the reflection of her own personality, where she was entrapped between the conflicts of culture, while discovering her own identity. She has to put down her roots to settle down in

America. When an individual adopts the culture of one's motherland, it becomes their identity. Immigration paves way to a new dilemma of cultural identity. It marks the cultural conflict between the culture of the motherland and the acquired culture, consequently leading to the rise of psychological crises. Mukherjee's fiction writing presents the traumatic experiences of the women immigrants. Her novels express the suffering, alienation, pain, identity crises, cultural shock and the psychological conflict arising from the friction of the different cultures. The characters like Dimple, Tara becomes the victims of psychological and cultural conflicts caused during the process of migration. But at the same time some of the protagonists like Jasmine, Hannah, Panna and Bhava gains victory in the war on immigration and emerges as a successful immigrant.

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