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Cosmopolitanism in Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction

Bijender Kumar

Ph.D Scholar,

Dept of English & Foreign Languages,

M.D.U, Rohtak.

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Abstract:

The present paper studies the novels of Bharati Mukherjee and establishes her as a diaspora writer with cosmopolitan outlook. In the world where the whole world could be seen as 'Global Village', there must be some beliefs, cultures, morals and ethics that would be common or similar to any part of the world and these aspects helps in establishing relationship. An intense study has been made to trace the cosmopolitan elements in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee and establishes her as an 'Indian Woman Diaspora' writer as her writings present the life and cultures of India and different countries from the world map. The paper also explores and highlights the cosmopolitan themes, akin characters and cultures in the works of Bharati Mukherjee. A comparative study has also been made between Bharati Mukherjee as Indian Diaspora writer and contemporary Indian Diaspora novelists. Paper also tries to establish Bharati Mukherjee as an Indian Diaspora novelist with an entirely different perspective.

Keywords: Cosmopolitan, Diaspora and Indian woman diaspora.

Moving constantly is human beings' own natural heritage, which has been the path of human evolution. In Post- colonial era, man has not only adopted different cultures or various languages but also adopted other places to improve his way of life. Since ages, man has constantly been aspiring to achieve the state of cosmopolitanism. Etymologically, the word cosmopolitanism originated from the Greek word *kosmopolites* which means 'citizen of the world.' *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines cosmopolitan as "a person who has experience of many parts of the world". It connotes that a person who goes abroad for knowledge, education, professional growth or business, tends to develop the tendency to shed off national biases, limitations and prejudices.

Cosmopolitanism is a western notion that epitomizes the need to conceive a political and cultural identity that encompasses all human beings on a global scale. Early proponents of cosmopolitanism include Diogenes of Sinope (Western philosopher in 4th century BCE) and Stoics such as Cicero who believe that they are the 'citizens of world'. Jacques Derrida elaborates the concept of cosmopolitanism in an interview "There is a tradition of cosmopolitanism, and if we had time we could study this tradition, which comes to us from, on the one hand, Greek thought with the stoics, who have a concept of 'citizen of the world'" On the contrary, early Greeks feel that it is a dictate of nature itself that humanity is divided into Greeks and barbarians.

The modern concept of cosmopolitanism is developed by the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. He argues that the rapid progress of human history is crossing the city walls because "nature has its highest aim, a universal cosmopolitan condition, which can come into being, as the womb in which all the original predisposition of human species are developed" (qtd.in Nail). Cosmopolitanism claims that our first inclination is towards humanity, rather than a country, state, nation or family. Cosmopolitanism is a belief that all people are entitled to equal respect and consideration irrespective of their citizenship. It is the ideology that all human beings belong to a single community based on a shared morality. James Paul opines that "Cosmopolitanism can be defined as a global politics that firstly projects a sociality of common political engagement among all human beings across the globe, and, secondly, suggests that this sociality should be either ethically or organizationally privileged over other forms of sociality" (qtd.in Wikipedia).

Cosmopolitanism presupposes a desire to construct broad allegiances and equal and peaceful global communities of citizens who should be able to communicate across cultural and social boundaries forming a Universalist solidarity. It has become a metaphor for mobility, migrancy, sensitivity and tolerance to otherness and independence from transcultural and transitional realities and claims. It came into vogue when postmodernism hit mainstream academia, especially in the 1980s and 1990s in the US and favoured visions of global heterogeneity and multiculturalism. The discussion on cosmopolitanism became intimately intertwined with debates on the transnationalism. This is an effect of 'orientalist cosmopolitanism' - a phenomenon similar to Edward Said's 'Latent Orientalism'. Cosmopolitanism often becomes orientalist because a focus on the global can cause a culture to lose sight of local particularities which can resist orientalism.

The renowned diaspora writer, Bharati Mukherjee was born and brought up in India, but she passed substantial part of her life in foreign countries including Canada and U.S. Bharati Mukherjee's major works include *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and short-story collections *Darkness* (1985) and *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). She wrote one following memoir: *Days and Night in Calcutta* (1977) in collaboration with Clark Blaise. She is also known for her non-fictional work titled *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Hunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987).

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most celebrated writers of the America whose writings are largely toned by the multiple dislocations and displacements of her personal life. Her writings show as to how postcolonialism effects identity formations in contemporary women's immigrant literature. In her writings, cosmopolitanism is intertwined with orientalism in consumer-oriented societies as well as on academic compasses and school playgrounds in US. Even though Bharati Mukherjee has warned against the dangers of exoticism, her novels in three separate decades indicate that her works have been commodified as exotic.

The Tiger's Daughter (1972) is an immigrant novel about returning home. This novel is about Tara Banerjee, the protagonist of the novel who abandoned her homeland (India) at the age of fifteen for higher education in America. In America, she faces many obvious difficulties as a migrant and to overcome loneliness, she makes new friends and tries to mold herself according to American environment. During her PhD work, she met David Cartwright (an American writer), fell in love with him and got married. She tries to live a life of happiness but after seven years in abroad, she feels homesickness and plans to return to India.

On returning to India, she is welcomed with great values, but she does not feel happy. She tries to find out her happiness and self-identity in her family members, friends, classmates and relatives. She also tries to search out her childhood happiness, but her efforts become unsuccessful. She visits many places to get her happiness and self-identity but there also she gets the ways of failure. She decides that she should share her mental problems with her friend Parnav, but she cannot express her feelings and becomes totally confused. Then she remembers her American life and her husband David Cartwright and feels that she has changed a lot in the last seven years. Through all these events, it seems that ultimately she is neither Indian nor American and this state is very close to cosmopolitan experience.

Bharati Mukherjee's next novel is *Wife* (1975), which is about recently married couple named Dimple Dasgupta and Amit Basu. They go to America for a short time for business. Dimple Dasgupta is a mentally frustrated woman who abuses her race. She represents those women whose desires are never fulfilled. During her unmarried life, she does not meet her wishes and wants to marry a neurosurgeon. But her father Mr. Dasgupta fixes her marriage with Amit Basu who is engineer by profession whom she does not like. When she realizes that her wishes may be fulfilled by marriage she does not even want to wait for marriage. But there she confronts a different kind of behavior which is not in favor of her fictional life and she thinks that whatever is going on with her is not long lasting. She wants to live in the same fictional world that she creates before her marriage and does not allow herself to face the real world.

Dimple is an Indian woman by birth and tradition, and she should follow Indian culture and its values. After arriving in America, she is involved in two kinds of cultures that are Indian culture and American culture. If she lives her life according to Indian culture, her growing desires will not be completed, and if she wants to live according to the culture of America, which is her imagined world, she should follow the American way of living. To get rid of these troubles, she kills her baby who is in her own womb and even kills her husband in rage. Bharati Mukherjee, through this novel's protagonist named Dimple Dasgupta tries to explore that a woman whose wishes are not controlled and whose mental conditions is not stable may execute any inhuman action.

The novel *Jasmine* (1989) begins with an unfortunate girl's story whose mother did not want to give birth to her. The name of the protagonist is Jyoti whose position has been painted as very pitiful as whenever she changes her name and identity she is pained by numerous sorrows.

In the beginning of the novel, an old woman foretells about Jyoti's life that after her marriage, she will become widow and exile. She does not rever Indian tradition and ways of life and begins to live according to her ways. She begins to learn English language from the days of schooling and even she gets married with her loved one named Prakash Vjih. After some time Jyoti's husband changes her name as Jasmine to make her look like a person of modern ideas.

But Jasmine's husband is murdered in bomb blast and she is left all alone in this world. Now she plays the role of bold lady who does not give up her boldness and goes alone to the US without visa. In the way, she is raped brutally by boat's captain, a Vietnam veteran whom she could not endure much and transforms herself into the Kali Mata (an Indian Goddess) and kills him. In America, she becomes a wondering woman and meets many persons. Whenever she meets a new person, she gets new name every time. Through the writing of this novel, Bharati Mukherjee shows that Jasmine wants to get her own happiness and self- identity. To get these things, she does not care for names, relationships, places and even Indian traditions.

The Holder of the World (1993) is a historical novel in which Bharati Mukherjee describes the meeting of two worlds that is the Puritan 17th and early 18th century American world trying to come to terms with the Mughal view of Indian life. Hannah Easton is a 17th century American girl who plays the role of an Indian queen, follows all Indian costumes and rituals. Hannah Easton was born in 1670 in the forests of Massachusetts. At the age of 20, she gets married with Gabriel Legge who is a pirate. First of all he takes her to England and then to India. In India, he joins East India Company as a factor. But Easton's memories of mother are haunted by hallucinations.

Her husband who is untrustworthy for her, asks her to go to India and without any problem she agrees with him. A day when her boat collides into a bridge and her boat is near to drowning, Raja Jadav Singh saves her life. Subsequently, she falls in love with him and gets married to become his 'bibi'. She pleads for peace before the Emperor Aurangzeb who is known for his brutality and inhumanity in Indian history. At last she succeeds in saving her husband's life and lover. In the end of the novel, Hannah Easton leaves Indian to search out her mother whom she finds in bad condition. Ultimately, she looks after her mother and lives a new life with her step brothers and sisters.

In *Leave It to Me* (1997) Mukherjee takes the themes she has previously explored a step further. Destroying the concept of ethnicity altogether, she creates a complex new, transnational definition of self but the discovery does not prove to be easy in a region where ethnic boundaries slide over each other like snakes in a basket and many people have discarded the names they were born with. The novel becomes a meditation on the Indian concept of karma and the Greek idea of destiny. Here, Mukherjee connects the residues of 1960s culture. She's particularly adroit in recalling the Berkeley counterculture and capturing its later expression in the alternative lifestyles and self-serving rationales with which ex-hippies defend their current lives.

Desirable Daughters (2002) employs unusual autobiographical material in an immigrant novel of self-discovery that combines elements of fairy-tale-like myth with a suspenseful mystery-thriller plot. The novel belongs to that genre of American literature which deals with issues of immigrant life and cultural assimilation. There are sufficient works in this genre that represent Hispanic, African and Chinese ethnic minorities in the United States, but relatively few that speak for South Asian immigrants in general and Indian Americans in particular. At the heart of this remarkable new novel by the award-winning author of *The Middleman and Other Stories* and *Jasmine* are issues of culture, identity and family loyalty. *Desirable Daughter* follows the diverging paths taken by three Calcutta-born sisters as they come of age in a changing world. Tara, Padma and Parvati were born into a wealthy Brahmin family presided over by their doting father and the traditional mother. Girls are shown intelligent and artistic. Their subsequent rebellion will lead them in different directions through different circumstances into different continents that strengthen their relationship.

Nagender Kumar in his book which is entitled as *The Fictional and Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective*, describes Mukherjee's writings into three phases—the Phase of Expatriation, the Phase of Transition and the Phase of Immigration and tries to explain the quality of culture conflicts which exist in Mukherjee's protagonists. Florence D' Souza in her article "Bharati Mukherjee", analyses Mukherjee's fictional writings and finds out various themes including 'crippling legacies of colonialism, migration, instances of discrimination and violence, and encounters with cultural otherness' etc. She concludes her article 'her fictional creations seem to be centered on Otherness and Difference.'

S.P Swan in his article "Problems of Identity: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*" explains Mukherjee's liquid and dislocated society, wondrous, roaming, adventurous, constantly changing identity and transit way of life and frustrated characters. Bhagat Nayak in his article "Quest for Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*" opines that Mukherjee in her novels explains the women's conditions, their mental situations and focuses on quest for identity and constant immigration from India to US. Jayadeep Sarangi in his article "Bond without Bondage: Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri" states about Mukherjee's characters and her works. He says that her 'characters do not share any hostile distancing from their homeland' and 'they even don't neglect the call of the alien identity.'

M. Sivaramkrishna, in his article "Bharati Mukherjee" states that Mukherjee in her works tells about a voice that is raised against the atrocities of the women to establish their identity in their homeland or foreign countries. Another critic, Enakshi Chowdhury in her article "Images of Women in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels", describes that woman plays the central role in the Mukherjee's novels. They live in a society where there is no bondage on them and spend their life according to their wishes. Sushma Tandon in her book *Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction: A Perspective*, describes Mukherjee's Canadian life where she faces violence, physical assaults, insult and her journey's experiences from Canada to US.

No doubt, plethoras of researches are available on Bharati Mukherjee but the present research intends to touch upon the unexplored aspects of her writings. Among the major critical works written on Bharati Mukherjee, there is hardly any work that interprets her writings beyond the domain of diaspora sensibility. Therefore, the relevance of the present research paper lies in its newness, contemporary significance and out of box analysis of her novels.

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