

## Cultural Conflict, Assimilation and Self-Transformation in Bharati Mukherjee's *Selected Novels*

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### Abstract

*Bharati Mukherjee's place in contemporary diaspora and American literature has the feature of the fact that the themes of migration, cultural clash, assimilation, identity, gender, displacement, and self-transformation are raised. Her protagonists are on the move searching for something that would help them realize their potential as individuals. Migration is presented as a process when people negotiate their values and beliefs since returning to the motherland or migrating to another region involves cultural, ideological, psychological, and geographical duality. The purpose of this paper is to examine cultural clash, assimilation and self-transformation in a number of Bharati Mukherjee's novels: *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971), *Wife* (1975), *Jasmine* (1989), and *Desirable Daughters* (2002). It is suggested that the immigrant identity in Bharati Mukherjee's novels changes in different phases of her story. The impact of cultural clash produces alienation, breakdown, and inability to adjust in the new cultural setting in her earlier novels. Later stories show that the notion of cultural displacement serves as a mechanism for self-creation and transformation. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara Banerjee Cartwright discovers how little India has changed and the idealized India in which she had lived for twenty years is gone. Dimple, the protagonist of *Wife*, is faced with devastating cultural and patriarchal dislocation. Jasmine undergoes a set of transformations as she moves across the United States, living in different social circles. In *Desirable Daughters*, Tara has to negotiate her Indian traditional and American modern cultural values, her family history and the idea of multicultural identity. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity and 'the Third Space' and his understanding of the process of diaspora and identity is a framework for this study. This study argues that Bharati Mukherjee problematizes the idea of fixed cultural identity and presents it as contingent and negotiated.*

**Keywords:** Cultural conflict, assimilation, self-transformation, diaspora, hybridity, immigrant identity, multicultural, gender, identity.

### Introduction

Migration produces situations wherein individuals live through the tensions and contradictions of different cultural settings, social institutions, languages, memories, and belonging. Migration also produces reconsideration or rethinking of who one is. The diaspora literature deals with the manifold relationships between the homeland and the host country, tradition and modernity, memory and experience, cultural continuity and change. Bharati Mukherjee's fiction is concerned with this issue as her protagonists live through the process of migration, making them cultural hybrids capable of living through contradictory situations. Her fiction

consistently deals with the experience of Indian women who are exposed to a new cultural setting through immigration, education, marital ties, sojourn, return, and transnational families. Her fiction shows that the relationships between migrants and the host country are far from being harmonious. She shows that while the migrant may long for her homeland, she may also discover through experience that the homeland is not at all what she thought it was. Similarly, while the host country may offer new opportunities, freedom and cultural openness, it produces racial, cultural, linguistic, and social tensions. Cultural identity is thus seen as a process of negotiation. Bharati Mukherjee's contribution

to the discussion of migrant experience lies in the fact that while the focus in her earlier novels was on expatriation, she also shows the migrant's sense of alienation, dislocation, and the feeling of staying in between. In later stories the focus is on self-adjustment and transformation. For instance, in the study of Jasmine, it is argued that while the image of integration is used, the gender and racial components of the protagonist's experience in transatlantic migration are taken into consideration. This change is apparent in a comparison between *The Tiger's Daughter* and *Wife with Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*. A close reading of her earlier novels reveals that "The Tiger's Daughter" and "Wife" represent different forms of culture shock: while Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* experiences the contrast between the homeland and the present, Dimple in *Wife* has migrated to the United States and is faced with more serious cultural tensions. In *Jasmine*, cultural transformation takes place through deliberate agency. The shifts in the protagonist's life as she moves from one regional community to another in the United States are symbolic of the changing layers of her identity. Thus, this study argues that Bharati Mukherjee's fiction presents the process of culture shock, self-transformation, and hybridity. It is not that the migrant becomes "American" as soon as she leaves India; rather the process of becoming takes place through negotiation with the new cultural setting. Bhabha's concept of culture is helpful in understanding the process of migrant identity formation. The article argues that Bharati Mukherjee's female protagonists are not passive victims of migration

experience. Even though culture shock may produce feelings of alienation and breakdown, it reveals the tension and complexity of the multiple layers of migrant identity. The fiction presents a shift from the binary oppositions of "Indian"/"American" to the emergence of migrant hybrid identities.

## Research Gap

A considerable body of scholarship has examined Bharati Mukherjee's fiction through the perspectives of diaspora, immigration, identity crisis, cultural conflict, feminism, multiculturalism and transformation. Existing studies have discussed cultural conflict in *Jasmine*, diasporic displacement in *The Tiger's Daughter*, psychological and cultural difficulties in *Wife*, assimilation and assertion in *Miss New India*, and the relationship between diasporic identity and family relationships in several novels. Recent scholarship has also begun to bring assimilation, identity and multicultural consciousness together.

However, a significant gap remains in the way these issues are conceptually connected across Mukherjee's fiction. Much of the existing criticism concentrates on a single novel, a small group of novels, or one dominant thematic category such as diaspora, identity, feminism or assimilation. Consequently, there is scope for a sustained comparative study that examines cultural conflict, assimilation and self-transformation as successive and interconnected dimensions of immigrant identity formation.

This study fills this gap by comparing selected novels by Mukherjee at different

stages of her creative development: “The Tiger’s Daughter”, “Wife”, “Jasmine”, “Desirable Daughters”, “Miss New India”. Such a comparison allows an insight into the changing nature of the immigrant in the author’s prose. Moreover, based on this comparison, it becomes possible to separate the characters who perceive cultural conflict from the viewpoint of alienation and crisis from those who gradually adapt to a new culture, adjusting it to their needs and desires.

## Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine cultural clashes as depicted in a chosen set of Mukherjee’s novels.
2. To analyze issues of assimilation presented in the stories by Mukherjee’s female protagonists.
3. To review hybridity and multicultural identities as presented in the works of Mukherjee.
4. To investigate the connection between gender and cultural clashes.
5. To analyze the depiction of individual and cultural identities transformed through migration experience in the works of Mukherjee.
6. To trace the transition from being alienated to finding identity and assimilation as depicted by the author.
7. To determine whether the author supports assimilation, hybridity, or a different approach to negotiating cultures.

## Research Questions

This work will address the following research questions:

1. How does Bharati Mukherjee depict cultural clashes in the selected novels?
2. Why do the female protagonists in her stories have difficulties with assimilation in alien cultures?
3. What role do gender differences play in cultural conflicts and adaptation of immigrants?
4. Is it necessary to renounce one’s cultural identity to become assimilated?
5. How does self-transformation help Mukherjee’s protagonists to adapt to a new culture?

## Diaspora and Cultural Identity

The experience of the diaspora is multifaceted: it includes a sense of attachment to the homeland and the place of arrival, the desire to remember and live according to the culture of the ancestors, and the acceptance or rejection of the local culture. For this reason, stories of people who have made the diaspora need to be considered in the context of two cultures. The protagonists of Mukherjee’s stories make decisions motivated by their connection with India and visiting or living in the United States. Their experience does not fit into the dichotomy of two cultures but creates a new one, in which the principal features are confronted and superimposed on each other. Such an approach is helpful in reading *The Tiger’s Daughter* and *Jasmine*. Tara’s visit to her homeland demonstrates that, having left it, it becomes “home”; Jasmine’s experience in America is the reverse of migration, during which a person finds themselves in a state of creating identity.

## **Homi K. Bhabha and Hybridity**

**Homi K. Bhabha and Hybridity:** Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* is crucial to understand Mukherjee's stories theoretically. Bhabha problematizes fixed cultural categories and explores notions of hybridity, ambivalence, liminality, and "Third Space." Bhabha's thesis is that these concepts "seek to redefine the very idea of cultural identity" since it is not something that people possess intrinsically but rather negotiate in the interactions between groups. To put it another way, it is not a homogenous entity, it cannot be simply transferred from one culture to another, or it cannot be inherent to one culture solely. Routledge summarizes Bhabha's argument as an attempt "to re-examine the category of identity, social agency and belonging, through such concepts as hybridity, mimicry, interstitiality and liminality." It all relates to negotiating a sense of self, as hybridity and liminality are both ways of existing "in between" two or more cultures. The concept of "Third Space" is particularly pertinent to Mukherjee's fiction because the cultural identity of her protagonists rarely fits into either Indian or American culture, they rather embody both, but in a unique way that is different from either.

## **Assimilation and Self-Transformation**

Assimilation is not just replacing Indian culture with American one, but also a scholarly study of *Jasmine* shows this conflict between assimilation and self-identity, as McPherson discovers that *Jasmine's* gender and immigrant status lead to her transatlantic

quest for identity, resulting in both conflicts and apparent solutions:

- learning new social codes and patterns specific to the immigrant experience;
- acquiring new linguistic and cultural practices;
- forging new relationships;
- negotiating gender roles;
- transforming self-perception;
- responding to racial and ethnic differences.

A scholarly study of *Jasmine* clearly illustrates this tension between assimilation and identity. Thus, transformation of the self seems more appropriate than assimilation. Mukherjee's protagonists do not assimilate into another culture but rather transform themselves in the process.

## **Cultural Conflict in *The Tiger's Daughter***

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Tiger's Daughter* provides an important starting point for understanding the cultural conflict in her fiction. Tara Banerjee, an Indian woman educated and married in the United States, returns to Calcutta after spending several years abroad. She expects to rediscover the emotional security and cultural familiarity associated with her childhood. Instead, she encounters an India that has changed—and, more importantly, she herself has changed. The novel therefore dramatizes the conflict between remembered India and experienced India. Tara's psychological difficulty originates partly from the fact that she has transformed during her years abroad.

## **Cultural Conflict and Psychological Disintegration in *Wife***

If *The Tiger's Daughter* represents the conflict of returning to India, Wife reverses the direction of migration. Dimple Dasgupta moves from India to the United States after marriage to Amit. The movement initially appears to promise a new life, but the novel gradually reveals the psychological and cultural difficulties associated with migration. Dimple's experience is complicated by both cultural displacement and patriarchal oppression. Her migration does not automatically produce freedom. Instead, she discovers that the expectations placed upon her as an Indian wife continue to shape her identity even after geographical relocation. This point is crucial because Mukherjee refuses to treat migration as a simple movement from oppression to liberation. Wife is the rarest kind of book, combining artistry, humour and cultural diagnosis,. Unlike *The Tiger's Daughter*, Mukherjee in Wife simplifies and sharpens her focus. It appears, "she re-verses the pilgrimage, journeying from East to West, she con-fronts personal and social violence head on, and she splits her complex self into facets, creating characters who shatter like glass."<sup>44</sup> Violence is Dimple's fundamental experience of New York. Mukherjee develops her theme, the North American education of Dimple, with complex irony and skill, transforming cultural symbols into surreal images of Dimple's final madness, where 'television becomes the voice of conscience in her head.' But Mukherjee makes it clear that television does not make an eagle out of a dove like most people.

## From Exile to Immigration Jasmine

In *Jasmine*, Mukherjee significantly transforms the treatment of the immigrant experience. The protagonist begins her life in India as Jyoti but undergoes various transformations while navigating the distinct geographical and social landscapes of the United States. Scholarly analyses of the novel frequently emphasize her journey from India to various American locations and the evolution of her identity. Such shifts can be presented in the following form: Jyoti – Jasmine – Jase – Jane. The particular transformation of names can be used as an example of acculturation or phases of adapting to a new environment. Thus, Jasmine is a prototype of hybridity according to Bhabha's theory of hybridity due to the fact that her identity is formed on the intersection of two cultures without returning to the original form, that is, Indian culture in this case.

## Conclusion

A selection of Bharati Mukherjee's novels constitutes an ongoing exploration of cultural clash, assimilation, and self-transmutation in migration. *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife*, *Jasmine*, and *Desirable Daughters* present an evolution in the author's understanding of the immigrant experience. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, cultural conflict emerges from the impossibility of the myth of return: Tara finds neither India nor herself after migration. In *Wife*, Dimple's experience demonstrates how cultural and patriarchal pressures may crush an immigrant who has failed to acquire the psychological and social tools for survival and adaptation. However, in *Jasmine*, Mukherjee offers a more dynamic portrayal of immigration. The evolution from

Tara to Dimple, to Jasmine, and to the protagonists of later novels reflects a shift in Mukherjee's narrative focus from cultural alienation to cultural negotiation. Immigrants are no longer presented as individuals caught between two cultures but as agents in the creation of a new cultural space. In this regard, Bhabha's idea of hybridity is particularly relevant to Mukherjee's work, as her protagonists inhabit a space where cultures intersect, clash, and transform one another. Migration, therefore, is a process that transforms individuals in terms of their understanding of themselves, their culture, their home, their gender, and even their belonging. Consequently, the trajectory of cultural conflict → migration → pressure to assimilate → identity crisis → self-fashioning → hybridity and transformation of the self is particularly pertinent to the study of diaspora, post-colonialism, feminism, and multiculturalism in Bharati Mukherjee's novels.

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