

Conflicts and Confrontations in the Writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri

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The India-born writer Bharti Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. From her childhood she was in touch with the western culture. Though, an Indian, she is brought up in western background. She is considered as an ethnic artist who looks beyond the immigrant's sense of alienation and dislocation to trace 'psychological transformation' especially among women. Her main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian Women in a new world.

The Indian Diaspora had its beginning in the 1830s, when sometimes forcibly and at times voluntarily, some Indian people were dispersed throughout the British Empire. Jhumpa Lahiri, a diasporic writer, has written a collection of short stories and a novel. As an Indian living in the U.S. she has the experience of growing up simultaneously in two worlds--culturally displaced and growing up in two cultures, she has a divided identity and is constantly attempting to reconcile cross-cultural identities.

Her first published collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* won her Pulitzer in 2000. Her first novel *The Namesake* too received rave reviews. Both these works have as the underlying theme the experience of the exile.

In recent years a great body of fiction written by writers of Indian origin, the diasporic writers have emerged on the literary scene. A large number of these diasporic writers have given expression to their creative urge. The need to establish one's root becomes more acute in the case of diasporic writers. The diasporic writers locate and establish the cultural nuances with the diasporic space. While negotiating between the parent and immigrant culture diasporic writers occupy what Homi Bhabha calls "interstitial space".

The diasporic writers, though moved the country for past so many years, still feel alienated in their new country and who tend to write about people, food, and events that are typical of their motherland. For instance, Meena Alexander in *The Poetics of Dislocation* reminisces about the place of her birth across the Pemba river on the west coast of Kerala, even as she lives in New York close to the Hudson river. She keeps dreaming about climbing a tree in her native town and viewing the scene from above. Thus the feeling of loss, prevalence of longing, and loneliness have been reflected in the works of quite a few emigrant writers. In fact the manifestation of such a disjuncted, defunct and uprooted mood has been so frequent and dominant. The present paper focuses on how all the characters of

Jhumpa Lahiri and Bharati Mukherjee appear tentative and irresolute in their approach to resolve matters like society, culture, ambience and one's consequent adaptability or lack of it.

Jhumpa Lahiri's first novel *The Namesake* (2003) like her Pulitzer Prize Winner Collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) explores the theme of "immigrant experience and the clash of cultures in the U.S", reports S.Rajagobalan. Jhumpa Lahiri says in one of her interviews: "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children. The older I get, the more I am aware that I have somehow inherited a sense of exile from my parents, even though in many ways I am so much more American than they are. In fact, it is still very hard to think of myself as an American. I think that for immigrants, the challenges of exile, the loneliness, the constant sense of alienation, the knowledge of, and longing for a lost world, are more explicit and distressing than for their children. On the otherhand, the problem for the children of immigrants those with strong ties to their country of origin-- is that they feel neither one thing nor the other. This has been my experience in any case".

Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) is a narrative about the assimilation of an Indian Bengali family from Calcutta, the Gangulis into America, over thirty years (from 1968 to 2000), the cultural dilemmas experienced by them and their America born children in different ways, the spatial, cultural and emotional dislocations suffered by them in their efforts to settle "home" in the new land.

Like many "professional Indians" "who in the waves of the early 60's" went to the U.S. as part of the brain drain, Ashoke Ganguli too leaves his homeland and comes to America in pursuit of higher studies to do research in the field of "fibre optics" with a prospect of settling down with "security and respect". (*The Namesake* P.105)

After two years stay in the U.S.A he comes back to India, marries a nineteen years old Bengali girl from Calcutta named Ashima, who has no idea or dream of going to a place called Boston so far off from her parents, but agrees for the marriage since "he would be there". After the legal formalities, she flies alone to be with her husband, with a heavy heart and lots of instructions from her family members and relatives who come to see her off at Dum Dum Airport "not to eat beef or wear skirts or cut off her hair and forget the family the moment she landed in Boston". (37)

Like Mrs. Sen in Lahiri's story Mrs. Sen's and the wives of other Bengali friends, Ashima often feels upset and homesick and sulks alone in their three room apartment which is too hot in summer and too cold in the winter, far removed from the descriptions of houses in the English novels she has read. She feels spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable "home" of her father full of so many loving ones and yearns to go back.

Most of the time she remains lost in the memories of her "home" thinking of the activities going there by calculating "the Indian time on her hands" which is "ten and a half hours ahead in Calcutta". She spends her time rereading Bengali short stories, poems and articles from the Bengali magazines she has brought with her. She "Keeps her ears trained, between the hours of twelve and two, for the sound of the postman's footsteps on the porch, followed by the soft click of the mail slot in the door" (p. 36) waiting for her parent's letters

which she keeps collecting in her white bag and rereads them often. But the most terrifying experience for her is “motherhood in a foreign land,” “so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved,” “without a single grandparent or parent or uncle or aunt at her side” and “to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare.” (p.6)

Like immigrants of other communities Ashima and Ashoke too make their circle of Bengali acquaintances, get known through one another. They know Maya and Dilip Nandi, “meet Mitras through the Mitras, the Banerjees” and then the young Bengali bachelors in the market who return from Calcutta with ‘wives’. They become “friends” only “for the reason” that “they all come from Calcutta” (p.38). Thus “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history”, says Robert Cohen. These Bengali families gather together on different occasions like the rice and name ceremonies of their children, their birthdays, marriages, deaths and Bengali festivals like navratras and pujos.

While making efforts to preserve their home culture “in their new homes, the first generation immigrants train their children in the Bengali language, literature and history at home and through special Bengali classes, and expose them to their own family lineage, religious customs, rites, beliefs, food tastes, habits and mannerisms. They also groom them to cope with the way of life in America. Ashima teaches Gogol,

To memorize a four-line children’s poem by Tagore, and the names of the deities adorning the ten-headed Durga during Puja: Saraswati with her swan and Kartik with his peacock to her left, Lakshmi with her owl and Ganesh with his mouse to her right. Every afternoon Ashima sleeps, but before nodding off she switches the television to channel 12, and tells Gogol to watch sesame Street and The Electric Company, in order to Keep up with the English he uses at nursery school.”(54)

Both Ashoke and Ashima face cultural dilemmas in the foreign systems. They find it difficult to make understand their cultural practice of having two names – pet name at home and good name for formal purposes which will be decided on the receipt of a letter from Ashima’s grandmother, to hospital authorities on their son’s birth and on his admission to the school. Hence on their daughter’s birth they decide not to give her two names.

Lahiri shows that the immigrants in their enthusiasm to stick to their own cultural beliefs and customs, gradually imbibe the cultural ways of the host country too. Though initially Ashoke did not like the celebration of Christmas and Thanksgiving but as Gogol recalls that “it was for him, for Sonia (his younger sister), that his parents had gone to the trouble of learning these customs” (286). Ashima found preparing a number of Bengali dishes for above forty Bengali guests “less stressful than the task of feeding a handful of American children, half of whom always claim they are allergic to milk, all of whom refuse to eat the crusts of their bread” (72). Though forced to sit in pujos and other religious ceremonies along with the children of other Bengali families, Gogol and Sonia, like them, relish American and continental food more than the syrupy Bengali dishes and enjoy the celebration of the Christmas, Thanksgiving and Halloween more, as attractive gifts follow therein.

In other matters too, like dating of their children, their courtship period during which young boys and girls stay together as Nikhil and Ruth do, and as Nikhil stays in the house of Maxine's parents, the hugging of Maxine of Nikhil's parents, her calling Nikhil's mother by name and pairing her fingers in Nikhil's hair showing her intimacy, though Nikhil's parents do not show their approval and moushumi's parents too did not like her going out with any boy when she turned fourteen, but these first generation immigrants do not react openly to their children's going, the "American way" as they know that their children cannot be forced to live by "the Bengali way". So by and by they reconcile to their children's adaptation to the "American commonsense" whom earlier "pressure" cannot bind together.(276)

Bharati Mukherjee, "the clear eyed but affectionate immigrant in American society", has become a celebrity for her distinctive approach to expatriate hood as a metaphysical experience of exile and as an agent of attitudinal change, both in the minority and majority cultures. Diasporal dream figures prominently in all her fiction. The shift to America wrought a sea-change in her personality and gave a new fillip to her literary aspiration. Her own acknowledgement of this is worth-noting: "For me it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to the exuberance of immigration".

The unresolved dilemma of modern woman is a recurrent theme of the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, a widely acclaimed author and winner of the National Book critics Award. She considers her works, a celebraion of her emotions that she brings out of her heart. Mukherjee's first well-known novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, is an autobiographical story about an East Indian immigrant who is absolutely unable to adjust to North American culture, but who at the same time is painfully aware that she will never return to the culture which she has left behind.

The central figure of Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Wife* is Dimple. As the name suggests, it is the story of a wife. The novel revolves around the character of Dimple, who grows, matures, rebels, kills and finally dies in this novel.

Dimple and Jasmine, the female protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee's *Wife* and *Jasmine* too are faced with the problem of the loss of culture and both of them are endeavouring to assume a new identity in the U.S. Both *Wife* and *Jasmine* chronicle the journeys of two young women to the US for different reasons, under dissimilar circumstances. Both of them pass through torturous physical, mental and emotional agony affecting their whole being to such an extent that they are driven to violence.

The novel *Desirable Daughters* begins with the quotation from Sanskrit verse saying that:

No one behind, no one ahead.

The path the ancients cleared has closed.

And the other path, everyone's path,

Easy and wide, goes nowhere,

I am alone and find my way.

It gives hint that neither the old tradition nor the new tradition can really lead to happiness unless you find your own ways of living.

The novels of Bharati Mukherjee's namely *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* contain a broader perspective as the women characters are utilized, how to explore the affinity between different cultures. Jasmine is shuttled between her identities of two worlds both in India and in America. Likewise Tara in *Desirable Daughters* is also drift between two lives. Tara begins to suffer from an identity crisis because of her familial ties and search for truth and security in both cultures. She perceives and comprehends the gulf between the two worlds. In her novels *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters* Mukherjee attempts to express the newfound identity of immigrant women who struggle to survive in an alien land.

In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara's efforts to adapt an American society are measured by her rejection and revulsion on Indian modes of life. Tara finds in India nothing to her liking. She admired everything in India but her stay at Vassar has changed her outlook of Indian life. The journey of Tara finally leads to her sense of alienation, depression and tragic death.

Bharati Mukherjee's *The Middleman and other Stories* won the National Book critics circle Award for fiction in 1988. It was recognized as the work of an artist who was developing her craft and enlarging her vision. The tone of *The Middleman and other Stories* is confident and optimistic and its settings and characters demonstrate a much greater range. The title story, "The Middleman" presents the first-person narrative of Alfie Judah, a gunman who hails from Iraq. "A Wife's Story" is about the impending rebellion of an Indian wife in America.

"Loose Ends" depicts the impact of war on the psyche of Vietnam veteran Jeb Marshal. In orbiting the protagonist is a woman of Italian Spanish parentage who is involved with an Afghan man. Griff, the central character of "Fighting for the Rebound" faces pressure to commit himself to his Filipino girlfriend. "Fathering" presents the perspective of a Vietnam veteran torn between the conflicting demands of his common-law wife in America and his half Vietnamese daughter. Jasmine presents American culture viewed through the eyes of the Trinidadian Indian Teenagers. "In Danny's Girls" an Indian teenager develops an infatuation for a Nepalese mail-order bride. "Buried Lives" is about a man from Sri Lanka who is determined to migrate to Canada. Mrs. Bhavé, the Indo-canadian protagonist of "The Management of Grief" struggles to terms with the loss of her family in a plane crash.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, a collection of short stories, offers the reader a variety of experiences that are both familiar and alien – all concern Indian protagonists living either in Indian soil or the United States. Four stages of development are registered in the process of assimilation-the tourist phase, the culture shock phase, the conformist phase and the assimilation phase. *Interpreter of Maladies* with subtitle "Stories of Bengal, Boston and beyond" projects the problems of the immigrants under the alien sky, the yearning of exile, the emotional confusion. In this book, six of the nine stories are set in America and the other three stories are set in India.

The opening story "A Temporary Matter" portrays an ontological condition dealing with the conjugal crisis of a young couple – Shoba and Shukumar. The Americanized Bengali couple exhibits the trends of typical post-colonial diaspora where the characters carry different socio-geographical identities with them. The second story is set again in Boston. The readers are introduced to Mr. Pirzada. He is from Dacca. The story has the civil war in

Pakistan as well as the birth of Bangladesh as a free state (in 1971) as the backdrop. Mr. Pirzada befriends a Bengali family in Boston. He seemed to be disturbed as his family stayed in Dacca.

The story, *Interpreter of Maladies* is set in Puri, India. The readers are introduced to Mr. Das and Mrs. Das. There is an elaborate description of the sun temple of Konarak, Orissa. They visit the great Sun Temple in an “ideal weather for sightseeing.” Jumpha like a veteran craftsman describes the dress of the family:

The family looked Indian but dressed as foreigners did, the children in stiff, brightly coloured clothing and caps with
.....translucent visors (44)

Mr. Kapasi, a tour-guide and chauffeur plays an important role. Mrs. Das discloses the real identity of Bobby to Kapasi. A most ‘oblivious question’ gets to the ‘heart of the matter’ and Mr. Kapasi asks, “It is really pain you fell, Mrs. Das, or is it Guilt?” Mr. Kapasi, the interpreter of people’s maladies, fails to offer any remedy to Mrs. Das’s malady. A multiple identity may be a reason for Mrs. Das’s queer sexual behaviour. In this context, we cannot reject her cultural uprootedness.

“Sexy” the fifth story of this collection depicts Miranda, a young energetic American who falls in love with Dev, a married Bengali banker. This story again highlights weak conjugal ties.

Mrs. Sen, in the story named after her, has a distinctive as well as individualistic speech: “Everyone, this people, too much in their world” – her impression of America. Simple household activities in India are mentioned in this story with accuracy. This story projects the difficulties faced by Indian wives in a foreign culture. A sense of alienation pre-occupies the hearts of people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland.

Bibi Haldar, too in the story, “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is presented against an Indian socio cultural backdrop. However, the Indian village in “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar” is given a rather more positive and complimentary treatment. The whole community scolds Bibi’s relatives for their cruelty towards her and they look after Bibi: At every opportunity we reminded her that we surround her, that she could come to us if she ever needed advice or aid of any kind (*In Malady* 171)

In Lahiri’s cross- cultural text the ghost interpreter - translator rhetorically constructs a successful Babel for Bibi. Bibi is a non – ailing, self-supporting, individualistic, single mother, rather than housewife or a partially enslaved servant who is treated as the outcaste of outcastes. The malady from which she is cured is the malady of interpreters.

The other story situated in India is *The Real Durwan*. It is the sorry tale of Buri ma, a refugee in Calcutta after partition. In her past an affluent woman, has now fallen to misfortune and self appoints herself as the Durwan or the gate keeper of an apartment building. In a bid to give the building a face lift, they throw Boorima out long with her boxes

and baskets. The eternal disparity existing between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' is sharply emphasized in this story.

Bharathi Mukherjee's multi-dimensional characters do not share any hostile distancing from their homeland. They even do not neglect the call of the alien identity. The rigid concept of irreconcilable hostility thus seems to be receding in favour of an evolving consciousness of coexistence, cross-cultural transaction is an interactive, dialogic, two-way process rather than a simple, active-passive relation. Bharathi Mukherjee's characters with different socio-cultural experiences relate to a process involving complex negotiation and exchange. Jhumpa Lahiri is a perfect interpreter of a cultural multiplicity. She is faithful enough to project Indian culture and tradition in realistic terms. Lahiri's stories are perceptive critique of human relationships, bonds and commitments that one has to make with homeland as well as the migrated land. A sense of alienation pre-occupies the hearts of people culturally as well as geographically cut off from their homeland. A sense of loss runs all through her stories. Her stories establish interpersonal bond without bondage.

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