

Expatriate Literature – A Bird’s Eye View

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An Indian American is a resident or citizen of the United States with origins in India. They either are born in India and immigrated to the United States or are born in the United States and have Indian ancestry. They account for 0.6% of the total population of the United States. Unlike the Chinese and other East Asian subgroups with significant concentration in the West Coast, Indian population is more evenly spread across the US mainly in the urban areas in general and the large metropolitan areas in particular. They are considered a very affluent community. Indeed, according to the U.S census Indian Americans have the highest median income of any ethnic group in the US (\$60,093). Like the terms ‘Asian American’ or ‘South Asian American,’ the term ‘Indian American’ is an umbrella term that applies to people of widely varying socio-economic status, education, places of residence, generations, views, values, lifestyles and appearances. They are known to assimilate barriers and come from a similar society.

Indians are among the largest ethnic groups migrating to the USA legally. Immigration of Indian Americans has taken a place in many waves, since the first Indian came to the United States in the 1790s followed by a few hundred Indian Immigrants through the 19th century. However significant emigration from India to the United States has occurred in two distinct phases, from 1904 to 1924, and after 1965. The first wave is part of a larger Indian Diaspora created by British colonial oppression in India. The immigrants were mostly Sikh farmers, labourers, and veterans of the British army from the Punjab province, along with political refugees and activists, middle-upper-class students from various groups, who came to gain political support against British rule. The immigrant farmers and labourers on the West Coast, from Canada to California, met with the same kind of resistance that Euro-Americans and Canadians reserved for the Chinese and Japanese immigrants before them. Anti-Asian sentiment grew steadily after the turn of the century, leading to acts of virulent racism against a visibly foreign labour force threatening white jobs in lumber factories, sawmills railroads and farms. Riots, evictions and expulsions were accompanied by discriminating laws ensuring the subordinate status of these workers.

The anti-Asian legislation directly affecting these early Indian immigrants until 1946 were, laws preventing them from owning land beyond three years called the *California Alien Land Law Act, 1913*; the *Barren Zone Act, 1917*, whereby labourers from certain zones were barred from emigrating; and *the Asian Exclusion Act, 1924*. The *United States v. Thind* ruling created the official stance to classify Indians as non-white and retroactively stripped Indians of

citizenship and land rights. Those living in the United States were prevented from marrying white women or from sponsoring wives and kin in India, with the result that, for years, families remained divided across continents, and many Sikh men turned to Mexican women for a family life in California. Some recent anthologies include brief glimpses into this world. Since there was little migration from India to the United States between 1917 and 1965, those who came after 1965 are not much connected to the early Indian immigrants. Also, the experience of the post-1965(second wave) migrants has been radically different. Enabled by the 1965 *Immigration Act* providing quotas for professionals, that is, those with occupational skills desirable in the United States, the second wave comprised mostly students and professionals from the educated middle and upper classes in search of a better standard of living. After independence, India underwent rapid industrialization, developing technologically and becoming among the world's largest "exporters" of Anglophone scientists, who immigrated to countries like the United States, where their expertise was readily absorbed. However those who came in the late 1980s are a different lot. Economic recession in the early 1970s "forced the federal government to revise the 1965 *Immigrant Act* in 1976, severely curtailing the entry of occupational immigrants" (12). The majority who came after the subsequent Immigration and Reform Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 were 'family reunification immigrants' and also those less proficient in English, hence unqualified for white-collar jobs. These scenes today are again different.

A fundamental reality of most first-generation Indian American is that they have grown up bilingual. Those who have had the privilege of being educated in English-medium schools have grown up with English as another 'native' language. Unlike Chinese language was no barrier. Their cultural traits, exceptional knowledge, good work habits have earned them the tag 'model minority'. For a language segment of the Indian Immigrant community, the ties to India endure. Their consciousness includes strong and highly differentiated regional consciousness, having to do with language, food, religious affiliation, dress, and degree of historical interaction with, or isolation from, the rulers. Given the present day technology of communications and the increasingly transnational flow of capital, geographical distances are not what they were for earlier American immigrants. For most first-generation immigrants, political conflict in the nation origin is felt swiftly and in many ways. Such was the case with every major upheaval in India of recent memory, whether the earthquake in Maharashtra, the sacrilegious entry of Indira Gandhi's troops into the Sikhs sacred temple in Amritsar, Punjab, and her consequent assassination, the 1992 razing of the mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu fundamentalists, and the consequent Hindu-Muslim rioting in Bombay, or the current violence in Kashmir. These catastrophes have reverberated in the lives of many Indian Immigrants. Indian American literature is among the very 'young' literatures in the United States, barely forty years old. Its writing traditions are still young, and are often found in journals which collect and anthologize disparate writings from otherwise unpublished new writers of Indian background. In her recent Introduction to an edition of *The Literary Review* dedicated to writing from the Indian Diaspora, Bharati Mukherjee explains that Indo-American literature is a new phenomenon and as yet only in the process of becoming a tradition. "The literary commonwealth of Indian-origin authors are

a comparatively recent phenomenon, still largely unremarked in this country. ...In Canada, where the East Indian population is proportionally greater than in the U.S., more names leap readily to mind...Since I'm a frequent visitor to writing classes in both the U.S. and Canada. I can't help noticing the number of young Americans and Canadians of my own general background who seem to be writing seriously and professionally....I'm moved and a little daunted; I know the immigrant world well enough to know that each young writer is a doctor, accountant, or engineer lost; a bright hope, a bitter disappointment. I left India for the freedom to write and make my own life; I can imagine people somewhat like myself, but.... It will take another ten years for the Indo-American writers to start making their mark" (400).

One of the abiding concerns for most first-generation immigrants, poised between living 'back home and in the present' is how to balance their dual affiliations in a country with the myth of the melting pot. On one of the spectrum is that "need to claim one cultural identity, singular and immovable", a position critiqued by Meena Alexander; on the other end is 'the shedding of Indianness' as in Bharati Mukherjee's positioning of her characters in the introduction to *Darkness*. "Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world. Though the characters in these stories are, or were, 'Indian', I see most of these as stories of broken identities and discarded languages, and the will to bond oneself to a new community against the ever-present fear of failure and betrayal"(3). Between these two positions, Indianness as 'singular and immovable' and as 'metaphor' lies a range of identities and affiliations, worked out in the genres of poetry, memoir, short story and novel.

Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction predestined to discuss the significance of the past to the present situation of Indian migrant women in Mukherjee's texts. It aims at challenging Mukherjee's statement about discarding the past in the process of forming new diasporic identities. I argue that the past in fact is important in determining diasporic identities and relates to the question of the individual's loss of communal identity and their effort to find another in the new society.

The thesis traces the developing relationship between individual and nation through the selected four novels. The study made an effort to retrieve the literature of Asian American women writings and validity drawn in their works with special reference to Bharati Mukherjee and her selected works. Her literary works deal with variety of themes like 'alienation, 'immigrant experiences', 'expatriate feelings', or 'diasporic' elements. It also paid attention to various reasons responsible for the emergence of women writings. The most important and pertinent issue that I have discussed in the first chapter is the evolution of the personalities women in an alien country.

Her fiction *deals* with the portrayal of an Indian woman's migration to the United States, and how she suffered from a sense of homelessness without relief. The chapter explains the story of a young Bengali Indian woman, Dimple Dasgupta, who moves from Calcutta to New York with her husband shortly after their marriage. After yearning for a chance to leave behind what she sees as a stolid, suffocating middle-class life in Calcutta, Dimple, in the end, experiences migration only as a series of paralyzing social and psychological displacements, a deepening loss

of control over her identity that finally leads to mental instability and her killing of her husband. In examining this story of never arriving, never completing the transition from one cultural, class and familial location to another, I focus on the novel's portrayal of the female protagonist's physical, social and psychological isolation both from the surrounding American society and the immigrant community. Mukherjee represents the various forms of isolation as, on the one hand, traumatic alienation from the minority group which at times overrides the individual's experiences, but, on the other hand, as a survival mechanism that allows for familial and social identities that sustain the individual's self-image. Furthermore, in representing the different forms of isolation on the overlapping margins of the host society and the immigrant peer group, Mukherjee not only criticizes but also ironizes and thereby attempts to demystify culture and class-specific gender norms. The aim of *Wife* is to narrate, not only Indian migrant women's presence in the private and the public space, but also the social, cultural and economic subtext for this presence, or lack of it. It also re-examines the story of a young Indian immigrant named Dimple, a woman traumatized by the incongruities between her expectations of America and the actual process of Americanization. The first of Mukherjee's novel set in the United States, *Wife* offers the author's first sustained portrait of America as a whole, a culture defined by a crippling multiculturalism that emphasizes ethnic difference and permits segregation, thereby preventing hybridity. The enforced difference and isolation of the Indian community in *Wife* ultimately destroys Dimple. Despite the impediment that multiculturalism presents the immigrant, *Wife* still justifies leaving tradition-bound India for America, a place with the possibility of transformation and change.

The novel *Jasmine* traces the positive internal and external influence of a maximalist perspective. The character of Jasmine exemplifies the ideal, "New American" maximalist, and her wifely ranging cross continental experience serve as a fable for the becoming process of a New American. My analysis of this novel traces Mukherjee's use of inter textual elements as well as tropes that center on the concept of the continual recreation of self. *Jasmine* serves an introduction to several concepts in Mukherjee's concept of agency, mainly the hybridized self that extends beyond the lines of social categorization. This Novel explores the process of becoming a maximalist instead of providing a focus on this perspective's wider implications. It also exposes the inconsistencies and problems of a multicultural America but suggests a remained and accommodating American mythology that recognizes the importance of its immigrants and its immigrant's foundations. Chapter two argues that *Jasmine* (1989), Mukherjee's third and most famous novel, still reacts against multiculturalism as a localized practice in America, but Mukherjee goes to great lengths to show how globalization informs the practice. She focuses more closely on individual protagonist Jasmine, who smuggles herself into America from India and constantly reforms herself in order to escape the paralyzing association with ethnic difference created by multiculturalism. Jasmine explicitly inserts herself into American mythology, inverting it and infusing it with her Indian origins to legitimize her place in the nation history. She retraces the path of European immigration and frontier immigration and redefines the terms of individualism and Hollywood's cowboy and Indian rhetoric. In so

doing, she shows not difference but similarity with the American Dream and mythos, melding with it in an act of transformative hybridity that reinvigorates the natural American citizens and redefines the nation as movement and negotiation instead of fixity and stagnation. The rise of globalization studies in the 1990s prompted Mukherjee to reevaluate the individual's influence on the national culture in the context of the shifting relationship between the nation and the rise of a global society.

The *Tiger's Daughter* (1971) with subtitle *Diasporic Individuality* deals how on the last few decades have witnessed a remarkable change in the perspective of women in Indian English fiction. One of the reasons for this altered point of view has been the mass exodus of Indians to the West and the East. The expatriate writers or their writings have been able to transform the stereotypical sufferings of a woman to an aggressive or independence person trying to seek an identity of her own through her various relationships within the family and society. As a natural consequence their writings, reflect what we consider an expatriate sensibility generated due to cultural disparity and emotional disintegration. In this process it is the woman who suffers the most because of her multiple dislocations. She gets involved in an act of sustained self-removal from her native culture, balanced by a conscious resistance to total inclusion in the new host society. She carries the burden of cultural values of her native land with her to her new country, thus making it more difficult and problematic for her to adjust. She is caught between cultures and this feeling of in-between's or being juxtaposed poses before her the problem of trying to maintain a balance between her dual affiliations. Nevertheless, along with the trauma of displacement she is fired by the will to bound herself to a new community, to a new narrative of identity. As Chowdhury asserts, "For a critical evaluation of Bharati Mukherjee's female characters, one must understand that all her women characters are people on the periphery of all society in which they have chosen to spend their lives; they are all immigrants and new ones at that"(93). In this context we may review the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, whose writings are largely honed by her personal experience as a woman caught in-between clutches of diverse attitudes.

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