

## Craving for Connectedness in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels: A Study of her Novels

# 6

*Sumita Ashri\**

Bharati Mukherjee was born on July 27, 1940, in an upper-middle class Hindu Brahmin family of Calcutta, India, West Bengal. In 1947, her father was given a job in England and he brought his family to live there until 1951, which gave Mukherjee an opportunity to develop and perfect her English language skills. Mukherjee earned a B.A. with honors from the University of Calcutta in 1959. She and her family then moved to Baroda, India, where she studied for her Master's Degree in English and Ancient Indian Culture, which she acquired in 1961. Having planned to be a writer since childhood, Mukherjee went to the University of Iowa in 1961 to attend the prestigious Writer's Workshop. She impulsively married Clark Blaise, a Canadian writer, in a lawyer's office above a coffee shop after only two weeks of courtship. She received her M.F.A. that same year, and then went on to earn her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Iowa in 1969. In 1968, Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with her husband and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. Her 14 years in Canada are some of the hardest of her life, as she finds herself discriminated against and treated, as she says, as a member of the "visible minority." Keeping in view these factors and circumstances, we can safely aver that Mukherjee suffered a lot as an immigrant in Canada and thereafter in America. So, in order to understand and comprehend Mukherjee's aspirations, dreams and cravings for

---

*\*Head, Dept. of English, Govt. College, Julana (Jind)*

a settled life both in Canada and U.S. we should try to expiate some hidden and lesser known facts and details regarding her life and living as immigrant, find exhibited through her novels.

Despite her strong anchorage and admiration of her Indian background and at the same time her love for American culture, Bharati Mukherjee has been unduly criticized and uncritically praised as a diasporic novelist, who does not come out of her moorings, personal problems and issues inspite of her efforts to be impersonal and objective while delineating her protagonists in the novels, so much so that many critics have seen Mukherjee's protagonists as tragic and the inevitable victims of the cultural alienation, psychological insecurity of immigrant life emanating out of the their sudden and violent contact with American society. According to C.L. Chua *Wife* is the story of a weak-minded Bengali woman who migrates to New York with her engineer husband in search of a better life; but her sensibilities become so confused and confounded by this change in cultural roles, the dangerous television artificiality, and the tensions of a woman viz-a viz her family and husband which ironically makes her mad, so she goes mad and kills her husband (54-5). However, to comprehend *Wife* as representing the effects of migration only upon an immigrant woman's "sensibilities", her emotional capacity, is to grossly simplify Mukherjee's views on acculturation and cultural conflict along with the correspondence between socio-economic circumstances and the manifold cultural experiences of migration. But Chua overlooks the fact that it is not really the contact with these American social phenomena, like factitious worldview of television and the responsibilities of a wife and a mother that cause Dimple's insanity, rather her reactions to them merely reflect the huge gap and complex contradictions between American images of home, femininity and individuality and the socially accepted female identity Dimple

is expected to maintain to be able to identify with her women friends. In other words, her protagonists either forge a bond with the alien culture or they remain unsuccessful in hammering out a strong and balanced assimilation with the alien culture and society and that makes the study of these novels a powerful exploration and expression of the theme of Mukherjee's cravings for connectedness. Whether these characters succeed or fall short of the requisite assimilation is a matter of contention, which varies from critics to critics and scholars to scholars the world over. Deepika Bahri in her essay "Always Becoming: Narratives of Nation and Self in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*" tries to express the interrelationship of women, America and movement by applying the narrative of dislocation and cultural hybridity, but she also does not take in to account the major role played by cultural factors and forces in determining the course and career of these women protagonists in their search for connectedness. When Tara of *The Tiger's Daughter* runs into the alien culture and unfamiliar socio-cultural milieu of America or Dimple is face to face with this foreign society, they feel unhinged and dispossessed of something vital, as they fail to hammer out a proper cultural assimilation and strong connectedness and hence become tragic and resultantly find themselves at bay. Similarly, Sudha Pandya in her brilliant discourse in "Bharati Mukherjee's Darkness: Exploring the Hyphenated Identity" speaks of the split personality of woman under the pressure of alien culture, even she also fails to focus on the crux of identity crisis in Mukherjee's fiction, because here these protagonists when confronted with cultural conflict find themselves hamstrung to forge a meaningful bond through cultural assimilation.

So, while Bharati Mukherjee has been received favorably by many critics and academics, she has also faced a good deal of criticism, particularly from East Indian scholars and critics. It

has been said that she often represents India in her fiction as a land without hope or a future. She has also been criticized for a tendency to overlook fixed and closed barriers of caste, education, gender, race and history in her novels and stories, particularly within *Jasmine*, giving her characters more opportunities than their social circumstances would otherwise realistically allow. For example, Fakrul Alam in his insightful book *Bharati Mukherjee explores the factors and forces that push the protagonists of Mukherjee's novels in a socio-cultural vacuum from where they cannot steer clear of their travails*. Suzanne Kehde in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity* talks about a new spectrum of social and economic values that eventually determines the identity of Mukherjee's protagonists in an alien culture. There is another meaningful discourse on the cultural and social accommodation and assimilation of woman in the Susan Koshy's "The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender and Diaspora", where the focus is more on the malaise of diasporic life and gender-specific mindset, than on the stream of cultural conflicts and assimilation. Likewise, there are numerous critics who scrutinize the novels of Mukherjee from various angles and perspectives, but none focus on the relevance and significance of cultural milieu that constitutes a strong formative and crucial influence on the protagonists in Mukherjee's novels. So, the fact remains that Bharati Mukherjee as a novelist has to be properly understood, as she delineates her protagonists in terms of their cultural and socio-economic compulsions and psycho-spiritual inclinations that define and determine what is called her constant cravings as reflected in her novels. In other words, Mukherjee focuses on this central stream of her novels and depicts beautifully and successfully these issues of cultural conflict, socio-cultural hybridity, pangs of migration and the consequent endeavour of

has been said that she often represents India in her fiction as a land without hope or a future. She has also been criticized for a tendency to overlook fixed and closed barriers of caste, education, gender, race and history in her novels and stories, particularly within *Jasmine*, giving her characters more opportunities than their social circumstances would otherwise realistically allow. For example, Fakrul Alam in his insightful book *Bharati Mukherjee explores the factors and forces that push the protagonists of Mukherjee's novels in a socio-cultural vacuum from where they cannot steer clear of their travails*. Suzanne Kehde in *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity* talks about a new spectrum of social and economic values that eventually determines the identity of Mukherjee's protagonists in an alien culture. There is another meaningful discourse on the cultural and social accommodation and assimilation of woman in the Susan Koshy's "The Geography of Female Subjectivity: Ethnicity, Gender and Diaspora", where the focus is more on the malaise of diasporic life and gender-specific mindset, than on the stream of cultural conflicts and assimilation. Likewise, there are numerous critics who scrutinize the novels of Mukherjee from various angles and perspectives, but none focus on the relevance and significance of cultural milieu that constitutes a strong formative and crucial influence on the protagonists in Mukherjee's novels. So, the fact remains that Bharati Mukherjee as a novelist has to be properly understood, as she delineates her protagonists in terms of their cultural and socio-economic compulsions and psycho-spiritual inclinations that define and determine what is called her constant cravings as reflected in her novels. In other words, Mukherjee focuses on this central stream of her novels and depicts beautifully and successfully these issues of cultural conflict, socio-cultural hybridity, pangs of migration and the consequent endeavour of

characters towards cultural assimilation in almost all her books in general and novels in particular. What she has suffered as an expatriate and immigrant both in Canada and United States get reflected through the life and career, struggle and strife of her protagonists like Tara, Dimple and Jasmine et. al. Maya Manju Sharma is aptly relevant when she contends that Bharati Mukherjee's fictional representations of the progress from expatriate to immigrant is to see *Wife* as a kind of Hindu moral tale that cautions against the easy replacement of traditional values with Western ones that do not fit the Hindu Indian society and self. She focuses on Dimple's "deliberate repudiation of a moral code for which she has no replacement" (15), her "moral and cultural suicide" (15), evident in Dimple's adultery, murder of her husband, and especially in her self-induced miscarriage in Calcutta on the threshold of her long-awaited migration to the United States. According to Sharma, Mukherjee shows in Dimple's demise the outcome of ignorance of authentic Hindu religious morality (17). Sharma claims that Amit's murder, "Dimple's divorce, Hindu style, is thus a kind of symbolic castration, a murder not so much of her inept spouse as of her own stunted womanhood" (18), stunted because of "the illusory nature of Dimple's idea of [personal] happiness" and her ignorance of the traditional, empowering divinity in the role of a Hindu wife (16-17). Edward Said has defined an exile as anyone prevented from returning home (362), and if it's to be treated as true, then Dimple Dasgupta is a suitable example of this issue. Salman Rushdie has also described a migrant's double vision, being at the same time both an insider and an outsider in a society ("Imaginary Homelands" 19). However, in Mukherjee's novel the "double vision" comes from the protagonist's twofold physical, social, cultural, and psychological isolation, from being an outsider both in relation to American society and in relation to his/her

Indian past, and as a result the character is always caught in the middle, trying to reconcile and assimilate the social disorder and cultural conflict he/she runs into. This double detachment threatens Dimple's familiar sense of self, and forces her to fight the disintegration of her identity, until the violent end. Mukherjee does not explore in *Wife* various reasons why both the American society and the minority community, from their opposite perspectives, prefer to find and fight for unity and cohesion where there is none. This is reflective of the precarious position of most of the characters oscillating between the two ends of the process of migration, those who according to the definition of "dimple" given at the beginning of the novel, leave only "a slight surface depression" on the larger phenomena of diasporic conflicts and the changed concepts of identity. That way, this study will focus on all these loose threads so as to make a vibrant and coherent exploration and expression of the strong passion for getting connected in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee.

Albeit some of the critical views and reviews are hard hitting in their approach to Mukherjee's vision, but their relevance and meaningfulness to the search for belonging and connectedness is almost negligible or even contradictory to what we plan to analyze and investigate in this thesis. The longing for connectedness and cultural assimilation acquires meaning and relevance only when it is explored and analyzed with individual conviction in tandem with socio-economic forces surrounding that person. Because of these distinctly different experiences she has had throughout life, she has been described as a writer who has lived through several phases of life. It is only through her varied experiences and encounters right from India to Canada and America that Mukherjee has been able to explore the sense of uprootedness, of alienation, socio-economic struggle, an individual faced with cross-cultural vacuum followed by her

endeavour to reconcile and harmonize these discordant strands. She lives first as a colonial, then as an expatriate, thereafter living a life of exile as a post-colonial Indian in Canada, and finally, she shift into the status of an immigrant, and then a citizen in the United States. She consolidates and fuses these several strands of life and backgrounds together with the intention of creating a “new immigrant” literature and a powerful diasporic vision to depict this craving for connectedness she has so closely wished and desired.

However, Maya Sharma’s emphasis on the cultural conflict and social morality of Mukherjee’s *Wife* overlooks the novel’s other sub-strands of this theme in which class, gender, and cultural and ethnic background affect Indian women’s acculturation in the United States. Furthermore, to suggest that the novel’s many-layered portrayal of the changing dynamics of female identity is merely an arbitrary backdrop to a story of moral degradation, where cultural conflicts and the characters’ resultant desire for Identity and selfhood encompass balanced Indian woman as product of the social expectations and norms regardless of their geographical, cultural or political location is like hitting at the central thrust and vision of the book. *Jasmine* is Mukherjee’s most popular and widely read novel, but it is criticized for being too short and its plot too contrived to be a really successful work of fiction. It is a novel that is directly dependent for its cravings for connectedness on an earlier short story from *The Middleman and Other Stories* and is explored and expanded into the story of a young widow who uproots herself from her life in India and then searches for a new life and the image of America. It is a story of displacement and rearrangement as the title character continually changes her stances and moves into various other roles, moving further westward while constantly jettisoning her past. Here Mukherjee

explores the idea of cultural conflict and cultural assimilation and makes it clear that Jasmine needs to travel to America to make something significant in her life, because in the third world she faces only despair and loss. What Mukherjee expected and hoped that people would read in the story is not only Jasmine's story of a strong desire for connectedness, along with the cultural assimilation with consequent change, but also the story of the cultural spectrum one encounters while shifting from the East to the West.

*Darkness*, her first collection of short stories, deals with the natives of South Asia who long for success and stability, but are burdened with their cultural and psycho-spiritual ethos to the extent that they face difficulties of prejudice and misunderstanding. This collection is a transitional work for Mukherjee, who is reflecting back on her difficult years in Canada and is strongly working hard to establish herself in the United States. In 1988, Mukherjee has a major public breakthrough that placed her into the top ranks of all writers. She was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction for *The Middleman and Other Stories*. In this collection, Mukherjee becomes a valuable conduit assimilating culturally dissimilar worlds into a vision of harmonious and livable world. She tells her tales from many perspectives, with a powerful expiation of the concept of cultural conflict and cultural assimilation on the part of the protagonist within a larger society. She wrote this collection in a lighter, simpler tone, with characters who are strugglers and explorers, rather than refugees and outcasts, and through their constant endeavour they become a part of a new changing America. Mukherjee's portrayal of an Indian-American woman's position in America of early seventies reveals a central yet unchanging point within the immigrant experience. In depicting the expectations set on women as providers of continuity, cultural

assimilation and social cohesion through marriage, motherhood and their support of the traditional patriarchal family, Mukherjee shows how the very importance of women's roles within the family and community makes it less acceptable for women to disturb the boundaries of their particular cultural, social and psychological locations. In the novel *Jasmine*, Dimple's life and struggle within the immigrant experience makes her more prone to these cultural conflicts and socio-economic changes both within the family, and class. Because of her key position as defender of family stability and continuity, her ways of operating and functioning in community and society are strongly affected by the shifts and tensions in the cultural paradigms of power upon which the familiar social and economic values have been designed and placed.

Dimple's own struggle for connectedness and identity, first as an exile from India, then an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as a immigrant in the United States has led to her current state of being an immigrant in a country of immigrants (Alam 10). Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*, the story of a widowed Punjabi peasant reinventing herself in America was published in 1989, the same year as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. Rushdie, also an Indian writer, received international attention for his novel when a fatwa was issued against him. The fatwa essentially proclaimed it a righteous act for any Muslim to murder Rushdie. Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, Jill Ker Conway's *The Road to Coorain*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Condition*, Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* were all published around this time. Each of these writers is considered to be a contributor to the genre of exploring the variegated spectrum of a strong craving for cultural and social connectedness and cultural assimilation from a postcolonial perspective. Although

there is considerable debate over the term “postcolonial,” in a very general sense, it is the time following the establishment of independence in a former colony, such as India. The sheer extent and duration of the European empire and its disintegration after the Second World War have led to widespread interest in postcolonial literature, which we find reflected and expressed even in the stories and novels of Bharati Mukherjee. For example, in *Jasmine*, the title character and narrator of Bharati Mukherjee’s novel, is set approximately in the year 1965 in a rural Indian village called Hasanpur. Jasmine tells her story as a twenty-four-year-old pregnant widow, living in Iowa with her crippled lover, Bud Ripplemeyer. It takes two months in Iowa to relate the most recently developing events. But during that time, Jasmine also relates biographical events that cover the distance between her Punjabi birth and her American adult life. These past biographical events inform the action set in Iowa. Her trials and tribulations encompass five distinct settings, two murders, at least one rape, a maiming, a suicide, and three love affairs. Throughout the course of the novel, the main character’s identity, along with her name, changes and changes again: from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jazzy to Jassy to Jase to Jane. In chronological order, Jasmine moves from Hasanpur, Punjab, to Fowlers Key, Florida.

Mukherjee’s main theme throughout her writing discusses the condition of Asian immigrants in North America, with particular attention to the trials and tribulations the South Asian women undergo in this new world, and how far these women are successful in reconciling this cultural discordance and conflict with their craving for connectedness so as to achieve a livable cultural assimilation. While the characters in all her works are aware of the brutalities and violence that surround them and are often victimized by various forms of social and cultural oppression, she generally draws them as either martyrs or brave fighters.

This struggle for belongingness and cultural connectedness has been shown by Mukherjee through her modest prose style, her ironic plot construction and witty observations. As a writer she displays a deft acumen with which to view the world, and her characters share that quality. Although she is often racially categorized by her thematic focus and cultural conflict, she has often said that she strongly opposes the use of hyphenation when discussing her origin, in order to “avoid otherization” and the “self-imposed marginalization that comes with hyphenation.” Rather, she prefers to refer to herself as an American of Bengali-Indian origin.

*The Indo-Anglian literature has been called and even treated as an underprivileged cousin of English Literature. But, after the advent of postcolonialism, it is duly recognized for its intrinsic merit and artistic worth. How the Indian Diasporic writers translated their personal experiences of an alien culture in to a powerful artistic vision is what constitutes the crux of this study. The Tiger's Daughter is a powerfully story drawn from Mukherjee's own first few years of marriage and her return home for a visit to India—a world unlike the one that lives in her memory. The protagonist, Tara Banerjee, returns to India after marrying an American and confronts a different India than the one she remembers. Because of the gap in expectations and reality that she finds here, the novel addresses Mukherjee's personal difficulties where she is caught between two cultures- that of States and of India which in turn makes this a study and an examination of who she is and where she belongs. In other words, the protagonist confronts a dilemma and cultural conflict leading to a craving for connectedness that she tries to resolve through social absorption and cultural assimilation. Similarly, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, co-authored with her husband, is an account of the first trip of*

the couple to India together after getting married. Each depicts and offers a different India through their separate journals, and ultimately, the two tell the tale of a relationship that faces the daily difficulties of cultural barriers that crop up unknowingly and each lives in a separate world that in turn intensifies their craving for connectedness amidst this cultural conflict. Both of them try to hammer out some sort of compromise in order to assimilate the discordance and bridge this chasm. Mukherjee's second novel, *Wife*, is a more objective story that sees Dimple, a young, naive Indian woman, trying to reconcile the Bengali ideal of the perfect, passive wife with the demands of her new American life. As a young woman who was cultured to be passive, Dimple lacks the inner strength and resources to cope with this cultural incompatibility in New York City as the young wife in an arranged marriage. Again in this novel, Mukherjee deals with the complications that come from being thrown between two worlds and the strength and courage it takes to survive and, ultimately, live. *Wife* is often dismissed as a minor novel because its heroine fails to make the transition from one world to another, and was often judged to be "weak." Although both of Mukherjee's first books unite complex tales, they slightly miss the strength of cultural assimilation that her later works are successful in affecting and capturing fruitfully.

This study is not only an endeavour to define interpersonal relationships as found in the novels of Mukherjee from cultural perspective, but there is also a deep and incisive analysis and understanding of this craving for connectedness from a variegated and multi-dimensional perspective so as to explore how the cultural conflict influences and impacts the reciprocal bonds and human relations in the novels of Mukherjee. So, after placing the cultural dimensions of the society in the novels of Mukherjee, there is an attempt to contextualize

Mukherjee's works in relation to cultural conflict and its assimilation, thereby exhibiting the beauty and splendor of human effort to cope with life in its entirety. In this way, Mukherjee seems to be the only writer who exposes the forces of discordance and mutual acrimony in governing human relations and family bonds. In this way, we find a beautiful story of an Indian woman moving from south Asia to America, and in the course of her journey runs into many difficulties and problems, thereby confronting the central issue of a strong passion for connectedness. All this is depicted in the backdrop of a shifting paradigm of cultural spectrum within a fast-changing society from a post-colonial perspective. As she said in an interview in the *Massachusetts Review*, "the immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformations in America and at the same time they alter the country's appearance and psychological make-up."

So, whether it is Tara or Dimple or Jasmine, what comes out conspicuously relevant and meaningful is the strand of a craving for connection by overpowering cultural conflicts and thereby effecting assimilation within a post-colonial milieu that both defines and determines the main thrust and crust of the stories and novels of Bharati Mukherjee as an expatriate immigrant in feminist garbs. A strong stream of cultural values and forces pervades the fiction of Mukherjee that determines the selection of her subject and its treatment alike. This way we can underscore and underline how her creative imagination is repeatedly influenced and inspired by the cultural conflict and cultural assimilation, despite her deep faith and pride in the Indian society and civilization. Known for her lighthearted and urbanized language, Mukherjee rejects the concept of plainness, which, she says, is "designed to keep anyone out with too much story to tell." (*New York Times Book Review*) Rather, she considers her

work an exploration and expression of her emotions, and herself a writer of the Indian diaspora who depicts the “melting pot” of America from various perspectives.

So, a close textual study of Mukherjee’s novels must attempt to unearth the influence of western American immigration, which eventually leads to ‘the sense of hybridity and the pangs of migration’ in her fiction. It’s not just the socio-cultural backdrop of her novels that requires a close scrutiny, but also the very processes of fiction making, including the plot construction, the character-portrayal and the narratology that also need close and incisive exploration in order to comprehend the individual’s craving for connectedness in an alien and strange world. Even though it’ll be a socio-cultural study from thematic perspective, it is not divorced from an eclectic application of various critical tools and point-of views that both define and determine the central thrust of Mukherjee’s novels.

### References

- Bharati Mukherjee. Wife. New York: Fawcett Crest, 1975.*
- Brinda Bose. “A Question of Identity: Where Gender, Race, and America meet in Bharati Mukherjee” in Nelson, Emmanuel S. (ed.) Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993.*
- C.L. Chua. “Passages from India: Migrating to America in the Fiction of V.S. Naipaul and Bharati Mukherjee” in Nelson, Emmanuel S. (ed.) Reworlding: The Literature of the Indian Diaspora. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992.*
- Chandra Talpade Mohanty. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” in Mohanty, C. T., Russo, Ann and Torres, Lourdes (eds). Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.*

Deepika Bahri. "Always Becoming: Narratives of Nation and Self in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*." *Women, America, and Movement: Narratives of Relocation*. Roberson L. Susan Ed. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998.

Edward Said. "Reflections on Exile" (1984) in Russell Ferguson et al. (eds.) *Out There:*

*Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1990.

Emmanuel S Nelson, Ed. *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. New York: Garland, 1993.

Fakrul Alam. *Bharati Mukherjee*. New York: Twayne, 1996.

Maya Manju Sharma. "The Inner World of Bharati Mukherjee: From Expatriate to Immigrant" in Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.) *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspectives*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993.

Rushdie, Salman. "Imaginary Homelands" in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London: Granta Books, 1991.