

Survival Quest in the Select Works of Bharati Mukherjee

Mrs.P.LALITHA

Assistant Professor of English
PG & Research Department of English
Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous), Erode

Dr.K.SARAVANAN

Assistant Professor of English
Erode Arts and Science College, Erode

Abstract

*Bharati Mukherjee has created a fair place for herself in the literary circle abroad by her contribution to English writing. She is one of the few prominent Indian American immigrant writers who has not only earned the good name in the U.S. but has also contributed considerably to the third world literature. Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists (Tara, Dimple and Jasmine) move to a wider world by leaving Indian shores and settling down as immigrants in the West. Like Mukherjee herself, they are all expatriates attempting to build a home away from home. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara is constantly plagued by a sense of rootlessness being homesick both at Vassar and Calcutta. Even at the end of the novel, we are left with the feeling that this tragic-comic rootlessness will dodge Tara's footsteps throughout her life. In *Wife*, Dimple is immature as well as neurotic and this is further aggravated by the loneliness that she faces in the U.S. Among the selected three protagonists of Mukherjee only Jasmine in *Jasmine* is a positive and the best developed character. She is realistic and ambitious and adapts herself to every changed circumstances of life. The quest for survival always being her prime concern, she shows an admirable, resilience as well as stupendous physical and mental strength. She proves to be a survivor in every situation. Though the three protagonists of Bharati Mukherjee are very different from each other, the only common thread that links all of them is the need felt to adapt and survive in alien surroundings.*

Indian English literature in the recent past has attracted a wide spread interest both in India and abroad. It has come to occupy a position of great significance in world literature. Fiction, the most characteristics and powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position. The novel that written in the last decade by novelists like Salman Rushdie, UpamanyuChatterjee, AmitavGhosh or Bharati Mukherjee is more adventurous, more innovative and more non-conformist. The major reason for this shift is that, during the last twenty years or so, an increasing number of Third World writers have emigrated to the west and the style and content of their writings has been greatly influenced by the extent to which they were able to identify and adapt to their new surroundings. Transformations in the world scenario engendered large movements of people all over the world. The world gradually transformed into a 'global Village'. The painful experiences of isolation, sense of exile, crisis of identity and efforts to bond with adopted lands equip English Literature with cross-cultural narratives. These narratives are brought together into a unified whole,

generally referred to as "Diaspora' writings. The narratives of cross-cultural clashes have established 'Diaspora studies' as an academic field in the late twentieth century.

The Diaspora sensibility comes through in the writings of Bharati Mukherjee; she has established herself as a powerful member of American literary scene. Her novels and short stories have been steadily winning, acclaim in literary circles. The main theme throughout her writings revolves round the condition of Asian Diaspora with particular attention to the changes taking place in South Asian women in a new world. The ordeals and struggles of the immigrants in America form the literary agenda of Mukherjee. Her novels deal with issues emanating from the encounter with the world outside the homeland.

Bharati Mukherjee is an expatriate writer who says she is "writing about the here and now of America." Her female protagonists are either Indians living abroad (in the U.S.) or Indians who have come back home after a period of staying abroad. Though none of her novels is actually autobiographical, the novelist's experiences first in Canada

and then the U.S. have portrayed the perceptions of her characters. An upper-class Indian home on a visit after seven years abroad, a middle-class Indian emigrating to the U.S. with her engineer husband who is in search of a job and a young widow off to the U.S. to fulfil her dead husband's cherished dream – all the three protagonists have to create a home away from home. Bharati Mukherjee has admitted that an issue very important to her is: "..... the feeling of a new identity the painful or exhilarating process of pulling yourself out of the culture that you were born into, and then replanting yourself in another culture".

The Tiger's Daughter is the story of a rich industrialist's pampered daughter – Tara – who returns to Calcutta "in search of the Indian dream" after seven years in the U.S. Unable to fit into the culture of Calcutta where she grew up, she finds that she is as much of an alien at home as she was abroad. *Wife* deals with the pre-marital and post-marital experiences of Dimple Dasgupta an ordinary looking, dull, middle-class girl, who fed on film magazines and T.V. serials is unable to accept the humdrum existence that marriage leads her into. Moving to New York only makes matters worse and her psychotic nature finds a final answer only in the gruesome murder of her husband, after planning suicide in a dozen different ways. *Jasmine* is the story of an uneducated, simple but courageous Punjabi peasant girl Jasmine, who travels, from an inconspicuous village in Punjab, through the breadth of the U.S. in order to fulfil a far-fetched dream. Her determination and resilience help her in the new land. The beauty as well as the brutality of America is encapsulated in the experiences of Jasmine who changes names and identities with equal ease. The first two protagonists namely Tara and Dimple are unable to come out of their alien status and become an integral part of their new milieu whereas Jasmine succeeds in experiencing life to the whole with all the "exuberance of immigration."

The three protagonists emigrate for three different reasons. In *The Tiger's Daughter*, Tara is sent abroad for a degree by her father. As a protected child, Tara had never been outside Bengal except for vacations in the hills or sea-side resorts. Now, when she is suddenly transplanted to Vassar, she finds everything unusual and even unacceptable. She desires to become a part of a new milieu but her attempts appear very superficial. She lacks the capacity to probe into the differences between the two

cultures, accept the merits of both or one and then adopt the necessary changes. Hence, she fails to feel at home, in spite of her best intentions.

In *Wife*, Dimple emigrates after a seemingly long wait, when she prays and hopes that America would welcome them early as she wants to start a new life, escape from the claustrophobia of a small house, an unlit staircase, water to be carried up in buckets and stored. Though she imagines that moving to the U.S. will bring about sea-change in her life, she soon realizes that her bitterness and loneliness only increase in the U.S. Dimple and Amit meet and socialise only with the Indians there and her attempts at acculturation are limited to learning to shop at the supermarket, swilling beer, watching T.V., listening to discussion on mugging, kidnapping and rape and finally a mild flirtation, or succumbing to seduction, with Milt. With these superficial attempts, Dimple can never become a part of American society and hence remains as an alien.

Jasmine was written after Bharati Mukherjee migrated to the U.S. and hence reveals a more positive approach to the problem of immigration. The protagonist, Jasmine, is very different from the other two protagonists and her reason for emigrating and her experiences too are very different. Moving to the U.S. as an illegal immigrant with forged papers, with little or no knowledge of life in the U.S., armed with just the address of a Prof. Vadhera whom she had never met, Jasmine's entry into the U.S. is fraught with dangers and pitfalls. Jasmine murders Half-Face and walks out empty-handed into the highway, American life swallows her up. Picked up by the kind-hearted Lillian Gordon, she has experiences similar to other illegal immigrants. She becomes care-giver and later Day-Mummy to Duff, fits in easily into the vacant slot left by Wylie in Taylor's life, runs away from him fearing an attack by Sukhi who assassinated her husband, befriends Darrell and even carries Bud's child without being married to him. Her experiences are as varied as the vast American subcontinent which she traverses. It is clear that for Jasmine it is willingness to accept the new culture that makes the process of acculturation easy. She avoids even talking about Hasnapur. Of course, she experiences the culture shock and feeling of novelty that all immigrants have to face. Life in America often seems like a whirlpool to her: "I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet

unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on". Yet, Jasmine does not face the dilemmas that trouble Tara and Dimple because she is willing to face the fact that life in the U.S. is radically different from that in India. She exhibits a resilience that is capable of adapting to every changed situation. Jasmine exemplifies the joys of immigration and makes no special effort to keep in touch with Indians: Aside from my Dr.Jaswani and Dr.Patel in *Infertility*, I haven't spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing," admits Jasmine. Having no desire to return to her homeland, Jasmine too has, like Bharati Mukherjee herself, "joined imaginative forces with an anonymous, driven under-class of semi-assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland, but no real desire for permanent return." On the other hand, Dimple Basu cannot think of America as a permanent home and would like to return to Calcutta. Mukherjee suggests that the only way to survive in the new land is to be like Jasmine and not "attempt to preserve the fragile identity as an Indian." Jasmine, too, realizes that in order to survive it is necessary to be assimilated or to achieve a fusion in which "immigration was a two-way process and both the whites and immigrants were growing into a third thing by this interchange and experience." Jasmine's desire to belong and become a part of American society is so intense.

Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists attempt to strike roots but the first two (Tara and Dimple) fail to do so because of their innate weaknesses. A sense of rootlessness drags Tara throughout the novel. When at Vassar, she yearns for the life at St.Blaise with her friends and the school nuns. She is shocked by the callous attitude of her American friends and complained of homesickness in her letters written to her mother. Seven years in the U.S. has made it impossible for Tara to feel at ease with her close circle of friends. American experience has isolated her from Indian life and culture. Dimple's rootlessness is caused by an inherent psychological trait which she is incapable of accepting her surroundings or adapting herself to them. Before her marriage, she always dreamt of marriage which "would bring her freedom, cocktail parties on carpeted lawns, and fund-raising dinners for noble charities." She never could feel at home, anywhere in the U.S. because as Amit rightly points out – Dimple's heart is still in Calcutta. Her attempts at Americanization are all very superficial because they begin and end with trying out

new recipes or showering at night instead of during day. She shows no maturity in her attempt to fit into her surroundings. Her rootlessness is clearly the result of her own "sado-masochism." It is Jasmine who is able to strike roots easily even as she moves across continents. From the moment she quits her rustic background of Hasnapur and becomes the progressive thinking wife of a modern, non-feudal Prakash, Jasmine faces every situation squarely. As Jyoti-Jasmine-Jase-Jane, she lives each moment of her life fully as she treats "every second of her existence as a possible assignment from god." Though Tara and Dimple do not mix much with the local Americans, in the case of Jasmine there is a constant give and take. This helps her break free of many age-old prejudices and achieve a total integration within herself: "I changed because I wanted to. To bunker oneself inside nostalgia, to sheathe the heart in a bullet-proof vest was to be a coward". Each time Jasmine is forced to move, it is due to an incident beyond her control – Prakash's death, Half-Face's murder and being recognised by Sukhi. Being a survivor, Jasmine quickly learns and accepts that, "In America, nothing lasts. I can say that now and it doesn't shock me, but I think it was the hardest lesson of all for me to learn. We arrive so eager to leave, to adjust, to participate, only to find the monuments are plastic, agreements are annulled. Nothing is forever, nothing is so terrible or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate". This facet of American life becomes a part of her mental process. However, her self-realization is spurred again and again by her conviction. "I want to do the right thing. I don't want to be a terrible person". Living in America, she learns to fend for herself not for others "learnt to live not for her husband or for her children but for herself".

Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* the third novel suggests a sea change in the title itself. The protagonist rises above being merely a daughter or a wife. Faced with a loss of identity at each stage, Jasmine manages to evolve a new identity at each stage. Whenever necessary, she frames her own code of conduct to suit the particular situation in life. From the unenviable position of being the dowry less fifth daughter of a farmer in an inconsequential village of Punjab, she blossoms into the ambitious wife of an engineer who has dreams of migrating to the U.S. As a child, she had to constantly face the discrimination which is an accepted part of a young girl's life in rural India. Even as

a child, Jasmine shows her courage by killing a mad dog. Though brains are considered to be wasted on girls, Jasmine fared well at school and became the favourite of her Masterji. She shows the capacity to be a fighter and a survivor.

A clear line of development is seen in the attitude of the three protagonists. For Tara, the cultural transplant is unimportant as she lacks the maturity to become rooted. Hence, she is equally rootless in both her native land and the land of emigration. For Dimple, the desire to belong is a deep-felt need but her neurotic splintered mind makes life both in India and in the U.S. equally frustrating. With the tendency to brood and dream only of death and suicide, she is constantly in a state of "chuntering". It is only Jasmine who makes choices and the final proof of her capacity for decision making and desire to live her life according to be her own rules.

References

1. Bharati Mukherjee and Clark Blaise, "India is in touch with us" by N.P. Krishna Kumar *Indian Express* 13 Sept. 1992 : 16.
2. ShabhaShinde, "Cross-cultural Crisis in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Jasmine' and 'The Tiger's Daughter', *Commonwealth Writing : A study inExpatriate Experience* ed. R.K. Dhawan and L.S.R. Krishna Sastry (New Delhi : Prestige, 1994) 55.
3. Bharati Mukherjee, Introduction, *Darkness* (India:Penguin, 1990) 3.
4. M. Rajeshwar, "Sado-Masochism as a Literary Device in Bharati Mukherjee's 'Wife'," *Commonwealth Writing : A study in Expatriate Experience* ed. R.K. Dhawan and L.S.R. Krishna Sastry (New Delhi : Prestige, 1994) 61.
5. JaiwantiDimri, "From Marriage to Murder : A Comparative Study of Bharati Mukherjee's 'Wife' and 'Jasmine'," *AmericanLiterature Today*. Ed. SumanBala (New Delhi : Intellectual, 1994) 174.