



## Indian Diaspora: Problems and complex process of assimilation with the culture of adopted land with special reference to short stories of Bharati Mukherejee.

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**Abstract:** *Diaspora was initially used for the dispersal of Jews when they were forced in to exile to Babylonia. Today, it has been used for any sizeable community of a particular nation or region living outside its own country and sharing some common bonds that give them an 'Ethnic Identity' and resultant bonding. In migration two unique factors need to be recognized. Migration does not mean the mere physical movement of the people. Migrants carry with them a socio cultural baggage which among other things consists of a predefined social identity, a set of religious beliefs and practices, a framework of norms and values governing family and kinship organizations and food habits and language.*

*This paper discusses migrants' complexity of problem which they face in the adapted country. The Diasporic community try to retain physical or mental relations with their home land at the same time they try to adapt some of the traits which are very important to settle there. This dual identity and cross culture interaction creates problems like culture shock, sense of otherness and rootlessness. Bharati Mukherejee, an Indo-North American writer discusses these problems in her short stories. In most of the stories protagonist fights with problems and shows struggle and trauma in the minds of migrants. She beautifully draws characters and creates situations which show the process of assimilation.*

**Keywords:** *Indian diaspora, culture shock, American dream, illegal immigration, sense of otherness, compromised morality, rootlessness, nostalgia, economic pull, double identity.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The Diasporic, may it be self-chosen or forced by circumstances is observed to have a problem of assimilation with the culture of the adopted land. The complexity of the process of the assimilation depends upon how the migrant adopts and adapt to the "other" land. Duality of identity, cross culture interaction, longing to stay on, and craving to return home either crushes identity or creates an integrated harmonious one. The first generation immigrant faces the problem of adjustment at its maximum whereas the next generation may hope for integration or a harmonious connection with the adopted culture. The immigrant with his transplanted cultural identity and ethnic feelings face the complexity in adjusting in the "home" away from "home". The adopted nationality fails to make one forget his or her nativity and thus the expatriates or immigrants remains closely apart.

Many times it is the reason behind the migration that decides his stay or return of the immigrants. The enthusiastic journey to the new world and the sudden shock or surprise, the mixed feelings of 'our' and 'theirs', 'here' and 'there' related to culture, religion or the ingrained behavioral pattern put the immigrant in to a clash. The indelible past or we can say the 'heritage' pulls them emotionally and the stronger pull of wish fulfillment (may it be economic, social or academic) makes get lost in the hustle and bustle of the foreign world. Sometimes the survival in the foreign world becomes a matter of challenge for the immigrant. The rigid and orthodox milieu of India on one hand and wish to fulfill ambitions; the greed for green card on the other, force them to comprise with the alien culture. But with the passing of time the one time craze becomes a permanent compulsion.

Bharati Mukherejee is a versatile write whose oeuvre includes five novels, two collections of short stories, some powerful essays, and two nonfiction books which she co-authored with her husband Clark Blaise. Her early novels are about the isolation of Indian expatriates. Previously known as Indian writer in English, she persistently declares herself as North American writer in Darkness. Mukherjee explains this shift as "a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration". Bharati Mukherjee is a writer who is at her best when she draws on her experiences of the Old World while writing with insight about the New World to which she now belongs.

Bharti Mukherjee writes basically about the experiences of immigrants and the process of shifting homeland that includes two phases. The first involves the exercise of choosing one's parent where one undergoes 'teething' experiences like, cultural shock, home-calling, rootlessness, Identity crisis, dislocation, sense of otherness, 'we-they feeling', rejecting-rejected, marginalization, ghettoization, alienation, ethnocentrism etc. The second phase is about assimilation which includes experiences like acculturation, adoption, double-identity, cultural exchange, mongrelisation, xenocentrism, etc.



## II. INTRODUCTION TO MIDDLEMAN AND OTHER STORIES

With the Middleman and Other Stories Mukherjee's exchange of mantles is complete. In these stories, sometimes with anger, often with violence, sometime with comedy, often with tenderness, Mukherjee gives voice to the "other" within North America. The result is a broader, more detailed portrait of the North American immigrant experience than wife or even the impressive stories in *Darkness* provide. "The Management of Grief", which deals with the sorrow of the bereaved relatives of the victims of the 1985 Air India disaster, is perhaps the most moving story in the collection.

The middle Man and Other Stories, a collection of stories won her the National Book Critics Award for Best Fiction 'The Middleman and Other Stories' has eleven short stories which vary in theme and technique and is about the experience of different people from different backgrounds who are forced to make their individual cultures take a back seat as they are busy absorbing the American values.

In nearly all stories of Bharti Mukherjee, there is fixed pattern. In this short stories collection almost all protagonists (immigrants) are in the process of assimilation or settling down. The other commonalities that surface in question of identity, stories are illegal immigration, bouts of nostalgia, constant comparison between two cultures, the urge for 'the big American dream', economic pull, compromising moralities, citizenship (as a protection) etc.

### **Culture Shocks:**

Apart from these commonalities there are quite a few overt and subtle elements that bind the stories to narrate the Diasporic tale. The phase of teething in Mukherjee's stories, begin with element of 'cultural encounter' sometimes leading to 'cultural shock'.

For instance, in the very first story 'The Middleman', Alfie fails to understand Bud Wilkins' passion for Baseball and is sure that he can never and brought up in America.

In 'A wife's story', the protagonist, Panna Bhatt is visited in the U.S. by her husband. Panna is comparatively conditioned to the American ways and doesn't mind being called 'Doll' or the flirting way of the Lebanese guy at the ticket counter. But her husband experiences a cultural shock as such behavior is 'disrespectful' back home.

### **The American Dream:**

The American Dream has been dominant factor among majority of migrant protagonists who wanted to make it big. The fascination for this 'Dream land' has various PULLs responsible for that; mainly political and free life style. But when dream and reality strikes, it creates new experiences. It results sometimes in to satisfaction and sometimes in to frustration. This is spelled out loud and clear in almost all stories.

All the protagonists have such an irresistible American Dream that they find their motherland- a dead one. Even the comparison between home currencies with dollar, in three stories, projects the tendency to look at West world as the World of Fancy.

In Buried Lives, Venkatesan doesn't mind abusing his nation and flattering the West World while writing application to eight different American universities. He says "on this small dead island I feel I am a shadow man, a nothing". He regrets for being born so far from America or U.K.

The narrator also resonates the same feeling in 'Danny's girls' when he says, "respectable freedom in the bigger world of America, that's what I wanted. Growing up in Quennie gives a boy ambitions".

Panna's decision to take a Ph.D. in New-York leaving her husband behind in India asserts her dream of Big World.

This American Dream is also sketched in the story "Loose Ends". Marshall in the story says "A man's mobile home is his castle at least in Florida".

### **Illegal Migration:**

The dream and the desperation to make it come true is so pervasive that even 'illegal immigration' asaway to reach America is 'no big deal'. Whether its Alfie of the first story who makes it to America illegally or Jasmine who hides herself "... in empty mattress box" in van to come to Detroit or even the Daboos who run a service "fixing up illegals with islanders..." don't mind paying a price to make it to the dream country.

In Buried Lives, Mr. Venkatesan, a committed English teacher, a realistic and otherwise moral person succumbs to his uncontrollable fancy for the American Dream. He pays a huge amount to reach the U.S. from his motherland, Srilanka. Even the route of this illegal migration Srilanka-India-Moscow-Berlin-Hamburg portrays a shocking glut of illegal migration.



Jasmine's father represents many such families who, despite being honest and realistic in their real lives, adopt immoral and illegal ways of migration. Such immorality is reverberated by most of the characters in the stories.

Loose Ends also have some mentions of people leaving on fake passports in America.

### **Compromising Morality:**

Danny, in *Danny's Girls*, in the grab of matchmaking (fixing in their alliance with American girls of Indian origin) invites Indian bachelors to the U.S. for getting 'a permanent citizenship'. He even goes to the extent of taking up an immoral business because according to him, "... real money wasn't rupees.... it was in selling docile Indian girls to hard-up Americans for real bucks"

Panna Bhatt's roommate, Charity Chin an oriental migrated to the U.S. doesn't mind having physical relationships with other men in spite of already being married. Averse to the idea of marrying an Indian, Maya, and the story 'The Tenant, marries John Hadwen, an American. The irony is that the marriage doesn't last long. She describes the change in her life in the words – "...tiny graduate student world became monstrous, lawless. All men became John Hadwen; John became all men". She sleeps with many men and loses her moral sense, her judgement, and her power to distinguish.

In line with her is Alfie Judah who lives without morality or guilt. He not only runs an illegal business but also doesn't mind sleeping with his boss' wife, Maria and that too, in his boss' own house. Jasmine, too other than illegally migrating into Detroit, doesn't mind "...rushing wildly into the future (American trend)" by means having an illicit relationship with her boss, Bill.

### **Sense of Otherness:**

The immigrants in Mukherjee's stories are either treated as 'others' or indulge in 'self othering' in the foreign land. For instance in 'Management of Grief', the Sikh couple who loses their sons in the plane crash doesn't trust the assistance provided by the Canadian government. It denies the help because of the fear of being cheated. The couple expresses its grief in the words, "God will provide... not the Government."

Also the Daboos in the short story *Jasmine*, live an ethnocentric life. They choose Trinidadian ways of living rather than assimilating themselves in the Western fancy. On the contrary there is an array of instances of the treatment as others in the collection. In *Jasmine*, The constant struggle of Jasmine to switch identity undergoes this "feeling of sense of otherness". She, while, sleeping with her married boss, Bill, an American on Turkish carpet with grate nearby makes her feel so gratified for getting Americanized. But a sudden jolt of otherness jumps in when Bill appreciates her beauty, "you smell so good.... You're something, flower of Trinidad." This shatters all Jasmine's fancy of Americanization and makes her feel 'the other'.

In the story, 'The Tenant', even Mr. Chatterjee, a naturalized American like Maya, indulges in 'othering' when he says- "These Americans are all the time rushing and rushing but where it gets them?"

The play that Panna and her immigrant friend Imre watch infuses in her sense of otherness. This is because the play insults Indian men and women. Panna feels agitated by the intermediating lines in the play which draws a clear line of 'we-they feeling, "..... their women .... they look like they've just been fucked by a dead cat."

### **Rootlessness:**

Though the decision to reach foreign land, is self-taken, why should one feel rootless there? This question sounds very logical but emotions don't work the same way. Nostalgia & family bonds surely insulate the process. Insulator from any side makes the immigrant feel rootless.

Maya the central figure of the story 'the Tenant' recognizes her strangeness and loneliness in America but she resists being recognized as a "Freak". Maya is a bold adventurer who has made a clean break with her Indian past. Maya is hanging in the air like the mythical trishanku after travelling a lot and having relations with many non-Indian men. She shows a real condition of a person caught in the net of two cultures. The level of frustration and alienation is portrayed quite realistic way. Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee have no open apertures to American culture. They get a culture shock when they find nephew Poltoo falling in love with an outsider, non-Brahmin Afro-Muslim girl. "...baap re baap! Our poor Poltoo wants to marry a NegroMuslim". This feeling of insulation towards American culture generates from their deep down rootedness in India. Many such examples have been catered in this story. Mr. and Mrs. Chatterjee constantly talking about Indian ways of life, Indian god, embroidered covers, Rajasthani bed-sheet, Mannaday's music, strong belief in endogamy, and contributing nothing other than taxes to the 'second home'. This contrast between two types of Indians Maya vs. Chatterjee couple is nicely portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee as she writes, "...he wants to live and work in America but give back nothing except taxes. The confused world of the immigrant-the lostness that Maya and Poltoo feel –that's what Mr. Chatterjee wants to avoid."

### **Nostalgia:**

'Jasmine' is also a story of a girl who is determined to achieve her dream of being part of Big World. Even her protest against her mother: 'I am my own person denotes her complete detachment from native land. But on the eve of Christmas we find



Jasmine sitting with a Trinidadian Daboo family where there is no exchange of word and every one starts crying missing their homeland.

The story oscillates between homeland and host land in *A Wife's Story*. There are bouts of nostalgia that Panna experience in America. It says, "Memories of Indian destitute mix with hordes of New York street people, and they float free, like astronauts, inside my head."

In 'Fathering', Jason's step daughter that he had from his ex-wife in Vietnam, can't adjust herself in American culture. The misery and painful situation at Vietnam can be made out judging this little feverish child, Eng. She recalls her grandma in her dream who was killed by American soldier during war time, "she bring me feed from the forest. They shoot Grandma! Bastards!!"

### **Ghettoization: Ethnocentrism – Apertures**

Ghettoization is the term specially used for the expatriate people settled abroad but oriented in their home culture only. They have such strong insulators against Host-land that they don't get assimilated in to them but retain their native identity.

*Loose Ends* is a story that extends one such example where we find a Sikh family as well as Patel family who don't live in small group or isolation. Once one Sikh reaches there, they sponsor a dozen of his people which frustrates Americans. Marshall, the narrator of the story describes a Sikh who owns a shopping store,

"Who let these guys in? ..... he won't hire us..... They come in with half a dozen kids and pay them nothing. We are coolie labour in our own country."

The same story has a huge Patel family. They own a motel. When Marshall approaches them for a room, they all were busy in one big room having meal together Indian marriages, and family matters. One out of them introduces himself to Marshall as, "My name is Patel..... A Patel owning a Motel, get it?"

Daboo family in 'Jasmine' sounds so Trinidadian in their life-style even after staying in America for many years. They run a service of setting illegal natives. Their clothes and slippers are also very Trinidadian. There is special care to Jasmine also comes out from their 'still-strong' connection with native culture.

### **Assimilation: Mongrelisation (two way)**

Bhikhu Parekh writes, "Indian diaspora represents half a dozen religions....seven different religions of India ..... nearly a dozen castes." "The Diasporic Indian is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, he spread out his roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world."

Assimilation, in context of migration means complete shading off or home-land culture and complete adoption of Host culture. Gradually we come to know that complete assimilation is not possible.

Jasmine: Sherry from rum, 'what '?  
"You drinking sherry or what?"

- 'Sherry instead of rum was a sure sign she had become white folk fancy'. Panna says about Charity Chim, "She us fully Americanized .... When? First moved in she was seeing an analyst. Now she sees a Nutritionist".

Panna: decided to stay back in America. When story opens, wears sari, completely Indian way but in the end of the story she doesn't mind standing bare in front of mirror. Symbolizes completely shedding off Indian ness.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Indian Diasporic community faced innumerable problems and this complex process of assimilation with culture of adopted land is brilliantly discussed in the short stories of a versatile Indo-North American writer, Bharati Mukherejee. She through her short stories describes the joy to achieve goal to reach their dream world and at the same time sudden shock or surprise. Indian Diasporic community has feelings of rootlessness or sense of otherness even after living in the adopted country for years. The first generation immigrants have problems of adjustment while the second generation tries more on integration or harmonious connection with new culture. Bharati Mukherejee writes short stories which show amazing understanding of Indian Diasporic community's troubles and their efforts to assimilate in the adopted country.