

**SEARCHING AND (RE) CREATING IDENTITY: A STUDY OF
BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S NOVELS**

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Abstract

*In recent years, many significant diasporic writers of Indian origin have emerged on the literary scene by giving expression to their creative urge. The need to establish one's root becomes more acute in the case of diasporic writers. These 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." Today's diaspora communities are much more diverse, with people dispersed in multiple lands and with a wide variety of individuals partaking in initial dispersal, including refugees, temporary visitors, international students, permanent residents, and so forth. Members of diaspora experience a strong bond with each other based on their shared belief of having a unique and distinct cultural and national identity as well as belief that they have a common and connected future because of this identity. The salience of identity cannot be neglected in diaspora studies, as creation of self-identity is one of the defining characteristics of diasporas. The present paper intends to explore the complexity of the theme of diasporic identity in three of Bharati Mukherjee's major works *Wife*, *Jasmine* and *Desirable Daughters*.*

Keywords: Diaspora, Identity, Immigration, assimilation, Culture.

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Introduction

Diaspora is an old concept whose uses and meanings have recently undergone a major change. Originally, the concept referred only to the historic experience of particular groups, specifically Jews and Armenians and later on, it was extended to religious minorities in Europe. However, since the late 1970s, 'diaspora' has gained wider interpretation and deeper significance. Robin Cohen in his pioneering work *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* analyses the term diaspora that is derived from the Greek verb *spiero* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over), so its literal translation is 'to sow over'. Thus, term diaspora in the context of people refers to some form of dispersion from place of origin (the homeland) and implies that people have been scattered and relocated to various locations.

Relationship of any diaspora with the homeland invites international relations as it involves at least two countries to formally accept to permit their citizens to communicate with each other. Today the diasporic communities go beyond their nation-states and homeland to network with their communities dispersed around the globe. The emergence of such networking and community sentiments, cutting across several countries, is most appropriately described as 'transnationalism.' In the post-colonial world, highly marked by globalization, transnational migration is a fact of life. Thus, there are numerous groups of people who traverse across the national borders to reach their promised land. The socio-cultural gap between the First World and the Third World nations is being abridged by constant migration. The Third world migrants have their physical exile in the First world, but they do not have the emotional separation from their cultural past. They feel the necessity of their

culture in their exile to sustain values in life. These people, who share the same homeland, in order to preserve their customs and culture, endeavor to recreate a familiar sort of surrounding and communities through which they desire to hold to their roots. The first and even the second generation of immigrants often have to face the problems and carry the scars and trauma to retain their national, ethnic, cultural, and gender identities.

The formation of identity for diaspora communities is subjected to various factors that includes not only individual and social factors, but also personal and collective. The opposing cultural forces help to create a multiple-self in these diaspora communities that helps them to acquire a global outlook and identity. This new and ever changing 'self' does not deny the possibility of the existence of the 'other' self, rather it thrives on the malleability of the multiple elements that goes into its making. For this reason, cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy argue that contemporary, hybrid definitions of diaspora challenge any essentialized notion of race, identity, culture, or ethnicity and instead focus on differences and the reconstruction of new, multiple, fluid identities. As Stuart Hall states, 'Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think. Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation' (Hall 1-18). Thus, identity is never static but an ever renewing and evolving process. In reality, multiple identities are created and reconstructed in these diaspora communities; oftentimes 'simultaneous diasporan identities' exists (Butler 189-219).

Bharati Mukherjee

Bharati Mukherjee, an Indian born American writer, is one of the prominent novelists of Indian Diaspora. Her commendable works place her in the class of great diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bernard Malamud, Isaac Babel, and Yashmine Gunratne. Quest for the definition of the self and search for identity are the main features of

Mukherjee's novels, focusing primarily on the diasporic South Asian women. Her writings are replete with the struggle for and search of identity by these women who find themselves caught in multi-cultural society and practices of foreign land. The surrounding environment of hostland gives rise to a sense of duality in these women that further complicates their sense of self-perception. For these women, identity is not so much the act of choosing between cultures, but rather having the power to redefine the terms of cultural practices and customs to fit one's own experience. Bharati Mukherjee addresses these tensions that result from such changes in self-perception and presents the related paradoxes that emerge from the process of diasporic identity formation.

In her novel *Wife*, Mukherjee expresses and challenges the hardships of multicultural society of an immigrant. She sets the novel in the United States to highlight multiculturalism and American dream of individualism with its limitations. In her portrayal of Dimple, a newlywed who emigrates from Calcutta to New York and suffers under the disempowerment and pain caused by a different society, Mukherjee depicts a fixed American culture that negates individual identity in favor of communal identities in foreign culture. Mukherjee presents us with a story of an immigrant who does not survive; so long forced to identify with either Indian or American culture. Dimple keeps oscillating between two cultures without getting a sense of belongingness to either of them. She please others by identifying with a group culture that ignores her personal need to change in America and identifies her only by her role—the Indian community sees Dimple as wife, and multicultural America separates her from itself as an immigrant. At the novel's end, Dimple murders her husband, and Mukherjee leaves us with an image of Dimple talking to herself and to the knife that she used to stab him in one elongated moment of insanity. No longer associated with any culture, Dimple achieves an unrealized transition, a middle ground between the fixed disparate cultural identities for her immigrant community and the hybrid culture of the ideal America.

In *Wife*, Mukherjee portrays that how community of Indians in America adheres to this model of privileging either Indian or American culture. The drive to compare starkly separates both cultures and allows the Indian

immigrants to boast their inherent Indianness, a duality they feel compelled to display and perform. As an alternative to performing a fixed Indian culture, Mukherjee's immigrants can opt to perform a fixed American culture, which suggests substituting one culture for another rather than joining multiple cultures to create a new one. Whether it is Dimple's choosing to buy a new cheesecake for dessert or Amit's acculturating her by making her eat with knife and fork, Mukherjee ultimately depicts that Americanness as a cultural identity is something immigrants cannot perform; nevertheless, they try. When Meena Sen admits that she suffers from headache when trying to understand native English-speakers, it causes embarrassment to all (Mukherjee 54). At that moment of 'inadequacy', Meena no longer performs; she experiences the confusion of an immigrant in a new culture with a new language to learn. Thus, Americanization, for these characters means discarding of Indian culture for an American replacement, which uses the logic of assimilation.

Dimple shows signs of dilemma of cultures which is a domino effect of her phobic condition in the end. Two incidents from the novel, one, her enforced self-abortion and the other, her atrocious assassination of her husband are emblematic expression of her turmoil flanked by the other and the self. Pressures of multicultural America prevent her from claiming a personal past and lead her to strive to maintain a distinction between India and America, often through force and violence. She refuses to welcome the news of her pregnancy only because the baby would serve as the reminder of the Old World, the India that couple intends to leave. As her life in America unfolds, Dimple begins to realize the impossibility of separating past and present, India and America, as the society dictates.

Dimple's affair with Milt, however, works as a metaphor for multiculturalism, for it seeks to substitute her Indian marriage with an American relationship, to supplement one culture for the other and therefore maintain the distinction between the two. Taking Milt as America, Dimple believes she can relieve her distress by sleeping with him, there by adopting his culture and discarding her own. In killing Amit, Dimple offers no hope for a new beginning as she realizes that she cannot perform America either by

having sex with an American or in marriage to Amit. However, it is the individuality of Dimple that finally asserts herself by doing an act which takes her away from her cultural history. Mukherjee acknowledges that Dimple's immigration has been one of 'misguided Americanization', but in the end Dimple finally transforms not into an Indian in America, nor into an American, but into an American with an Indian past. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee skillfully explores the themes of the complexities of the immigrant experience and foreignness, the clash of cultural disorientations, conflicts of assimilation, and identity crisis.

Mukherjee's magnum opus *Jasmine* is the story of a village protagonist, Jyoti whose journey takes her from the village Hasanpur, Punjab, to Florida, to New York, to Iowa, and as the novel comes to a close she is about to set off to California. Jasmine metamorphoses herself constantly during this journey, which starts from Jyoti the village girl in Hasanpur, to Jasmine, the city woman, to Jazzy, the undocumented immigrant, to Jase, the Manhattan Nanny, to Jane, the Iowan woman who enters the story. It is story of dislocation and relocation, as the protagonist continually sheds her existing role to move into other roles.

In the novel, we see Jyoti as a rebel and strong-will character who takes up various identities in order to assimilate herself in the mainstream society of America. She doesn't mind changing her names every time she changes location in order to give herself a new beginning to make her new identity and a fresh chance of assimilation in the new environment. The novel begins with Jyoti's childhood in Punjab where later on she gets married to a Punjabi modern man Prakash Vih who not only gave her the name Jasmine but also shared his American dream with her which becomes the fate of Jasmine later on. Prakash's renaming of Jasmine is a sign of her new and modern identity that represents her initial migration away from traditional Indian customs and culture. Jyoti and Jasmine are two distinctly separate selves, yet Jasmine finds herself occupying both identities, 'shuttling' between them and trying to understand the manner in which they both conflict and connect until she eventually becomes Jasmine.

Like all her novels, migration to America is the impetus to the main action and story of this novel as well. Prakash Vih who wants to go to America to study, gets assassinated on the riots of local rebels demanding a separate land of Khalistan for Sikhs. Jasmine instead of taking the traditional role of sati, take up the mission of fulfilling the dream of her late husband by herself going there. Jasmine leaves for America without job, husband or papers. She leaves behind the strange-hold of traditional customs such as dowry and sati and embraces the myth of becoming an individualistic American, prepared to forge her own path and destroy what stands in her way: 'There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We must murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams' (Mukherjee 29). In her struggle to remake herself, Jasmine does not resist several renaming by others, and moves fluidly among new identities thrust upon her. Jasmine is intent upon murdering her past as the only way to make a new life.

Upon her arrival to Florida, she is being remorselessly raped by the captain of the ship, Half-face, in a remote novel. Jasmine then stabs Half-Face to death, and in this act finds the strength to continue living instead of committing sati over the burned clothing of her husband. After the murder, Jasmine vows to start her own life in America, a life separate from the India and naïve identity of her past. For Jasmine, the trauma of her rape results in the greatest change in her identity; the experience that breaks her down the most is also the one that builds her up and allows her to come into her own.

Jasmine then fortunately meets Lillian Gordon who is committed to help the illegal immigrants. Lillian renames her as Jazzy, a symbol of her entrance into and acceptance of American culture. Jasmine soon learns that 'American' doesn't necessarily mean being white or actually born in the U.S., but rather it is the appropriation of cultural norms, of social behavior that defines what it is to be American. An identity that she has thought out of her reach for so long is suddenly a possibility, and she welcomes the transformation gladly.

With the help of Lillian, Jasmine proceeds to New York and stays with Vadheras in Flushing, New York. Jasmine soon finds herself stifled by the

inertia of this home, for it is completely isolated from everything American. Thoroughly upset by what she believes to be a stasis in her progression towards a new life, Jasmine intensifies her attempt to separate herself from all that is Indian by trying to forget her past completely. 'In this apartment of artificially maintained Indianness, I wanted to distance myself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like' (Mukherjee 84). As Jasmine builds her life in America, she longs to forget her past and all the horrific experiences that still haunt her. 'For me, experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill' (Mukherjee 85). Yet as hard as Jasmine may try, she inevitably finds that her past is a part of her, and although she continues to run from it even after all of these years through the creation of new identities, it nevertheless interferes with her current state of consciousness. While Jasmine creates a new identity for every new situation, her former identities are never completely erased, for they emerge in specific moments in the text and exacerbate the tension between self-perceptions, thereby causing Jasmine to create yet another more dominant identity, different from all those that came before.

The free spirited Jasmine soon leaves the company of Vadheras and finds herself a job of care-taker in the house of Taylor and Wylie Hayes at Claremont Avenue, Manhattan. While living with the Hayes family, Jasmine begins to master the English language, thereby empowering herself to further appropriate American culture. Taylor names Jasmine as 'Jase', Anglicized version of her name that represent the emergence of her increasingly Westernized identity. Jasmine's perception of her race also changes dramatically in her time with Haynes family. While Taylor's friends view Jasmine as a South Asian woman and ask her to help them translate academic documents and paintings, the other female caregivers in the building assume that since she is in the position of a 'day mummy', she must be from where they are from. Occupation (and its association with class) becomes the marker of race, while skin color and ethnicity are suddenly of secondary importance.

At the very moment, when Jase started feeling settled in New York, she had to run for her life to Iowa when she once saw the assassin of her husband, Sukhwinder. Here once again, fortunately she encounters Mother Ripplemayer,

the Iowan counterpart of Lillian Gordon who helps her securing a job of a teller girl at her son Bud's bank who gave Jase a new name Jane. Here we see Bud as married and fit man but after one year, we find her divorced, crippled, and in live-in relationship with Jane with a Vietnamese adopted son Du whom he brought from a refugee camp.

Jane once again gives her a chance to assimilate in the American culture by embracing the company of an American without marriage and also carrying his child in her womb. She does all what it takes to be an American. However, she identifies herself more with Du as 'they come from the same "Third World" and share a common legacy of suffering and survival' (Knippling 153). Jane was going on ahead with her life in Iowa till Du leaves and this leaves her shattered. At the same time, her former lover Taylor comes into the scene and Jane has to take a final decision of choosing between Bud and Taylor. Jane has been a faithful partner in all these years to Bud but she finally goes with Taylor to change her world once again and confides: 'I am not choosing between men. I am caught between the promise of America and old-world dutifulness' (Mukherjee 240).

An immigrant's life is in fact a series of reincarnations. One lives through several lives in a single lifetime. This statement has a marked similarity with Jasmine's outcry: 'There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves—in the images of dreams' (Mukherjee 29). Mukherjee, by subjecting her heroine to multiple codes of society and geographical locales seems to send the message that if one has to assimilate oneself to the mainstream culture of the adopted land, one should forget one's past. But this assimilation of Jasmine is not so smooth as it might appear on the surface: 'Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humor, as well as pathos—underlie her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of the old world and the assimilation into the new one' (Parekh 117). Jasmine's life is a perpetual process of migration from one place to another, from one identity to the next. Jasmine lives her life in the 'interstitial space' common to diasporic communities, a space characterized by continuous movement and ambiguity,

in which 'nothing was rooted anymore. Everything was in motion.' (Mukherjee105). Neither America nor Jasmine can ever be singular or whole, for they exist multiply, with each state on the map representing the possibility of a new self. Such is the experience of Jasmine in America and the diasporic figure for Mukherjee—it is a never-ending sea of voyages whose non-existent ends promise opportunities but rarely deliver, it is a life of constant change and transformation.

In *Desirable Daughters* also, the creation of identity emerges as a continuous process, forever transforming and never truly complete. Tara, the female protagonist and narrator of the story, moves from Calcutta to San Francisco at the age of nineteen after marrying with Bishwapriya Chatterjee, a young Indian man studying at Stanford University. Tara comes to California expecting to fulfill the role of the traditional Indian wife, but instead realizes that she does not desire to play the typical part in the Indian family drama. As Tara assimilates herself to life in California, she begins to dispense with certain age-old traditions and finds adapting to a Western environment an increasingly easier process. Tara soon realizes the fallacy of a 'real singular identity', for she learns that she is compromised of multiple selves, each with its own consciousness and instincts. Tara views herself through the ever-shifting lens of culture, her identity and consciousness contingent upon whether she chooses to accept or reject certain aspects of both Indian and American culture. As she continues to develop new selves throughout her life, Tara comes to accept that she will never be simply American or Indian, but rather dispersed between these categories of identity. However, Tara's frustration at her assimilation and Bish's lack thereof leads her to make the most drastic of personal moves in Indian culture: divorce. Tara's decision to divorce Bish represents a definitive step toward a new consciousness in which the traditions of Indian culture no longer dominates Tara's actions and where the opinions and judgments of others do not pose a constant threat. Tara's identity evolves, it is a continued progression that she does not run from nor fight, but instead welcomes. As Tara changes throughout her time in America, she realizes that identity is both multiplicity and movement; it is being many at once and always traveling

forward to be more.

As Tara continues to assimilate to American culture, her perceptions of her race and ethnicity begin to change as well. Tara perceives race as she was brought up to see it—in a manner that makes racial distinctions based on a cultural class system. Her 'native conception of race' distinguishes between subcultures of India; it recognizes race as differentiations in class and caste. Thus when Tara comes to America with this specific notion of race, she is shocked to see such distinctions disappear and Indian culture categorized as a singular entity rather than a multiplicity of groups. As Tara increasingly incorporates American culture into her life, she recognizes that the characteristics that she was brought up to consider as permanent markers of identity, 'region, language, caste, and subcaste', are neither as eternal nor as important as she once believed them to be. Tara finds the freedom in the possibility of blending in with her surroundings, of living in a society in which identity is not constructed solely on the basis of last names or skin color. The power to create her own racial consciousness and to be 'ethnically ambiguous', appeals to the part of Tara that has constantly struggled with a culture in which categorizations are of utmost social importance. Such freedom presents the opportunity to feel a certain angst that comes with searching for identity rather than having that identity already established from birth, it offers Tara the chance to fully explore the 'makings of a consciousness' instead of simply accepting her consciousness as given.

Some critics have asserted that Mukherjee's characters are simply too 'Americanized', that they choose one identity over another as the only solution to the battle of living in between cultures. Rangaswamy is one such critic, claiming, 'The only way for many of Mukherjee's heroines is to discard the past, totally and irrevocably, and embrace total Americanization' (Rangaswamy 166). Tara could easily fit into this controversial categorization of Mukherjee's heroine, for she appears to distance herself from all that is Indian, including her past. Also, Mukherjee provides a stark comparison of methods of assimilation through the contrasting character of Didi (Tara's elder sister Padma, married and living in Montclair, New Jersey), who makes Tara seem all

the more “Americanized.” Didi has essentially transplanted India to America, living as though her Calcutta days never ended when she immigrated. ‘In the nearly twenty-five years that [Didi] has been in the United States, she has become more Indian than when she left Calcutta’ (Mukherjee 139). In her attempt to preserve her culture, Didi has rejected all that is American, associating only with people of Indian descent, working for an Indian television channel and living in an area highly populated by other South Asians. ‘[Didi’s] clinging to a version of India and to Indian ways and to Indian friends, Indian clothes and food and a “charming” accent had seemed to me a cowardly way of coping with a new country. Change is corruption; she seemed to be saying. Take what America can give, but don’t let it tarnish you in any ways’ (Mukherjee 141).

But for Tara, her sister’s behavior is not a symbol of her desire to retain Indian traditions, but rather a craven response to the difficulties of cultural transition. While Didi recreates India of her childhood, Tara works to create a world in which she does not have to live in the past. To live in a world of ‘Indianness’ is to live a life locked in the past, which Tara believes is the downfall of many South Asian diasporic women. Therefore, instead of trying to preserve the India of her past, Tara moved forward toward what she believed was the possibility of change and progression. Thus Mukherjee suggests that distinctions among different levels of assimilation are too ambiguous and subjective to measure or define, for what might be seen as a loss of culture to some diasporic folk may be viewed as a necessary adaptation to a new culture by others.

Though Tara recognizes that living in the past, whether temporally, spatially or both, is dangerous to the development of one’s identity, yet she never completely discards her former Indian identity, for it remains a part of her consciousness and it always will. Thus, Tara possesses many identities at one time, yet she seems comfortable with her multiplicity, which allows her the freedom to assimilate while at the same retaining the aspects of Indian culture that she wishes to preserve. While some critics may view this multiplicity as ‘Americanization’, it is more aptly described as the new form of assimilation for

this generation of South Asian diasporic immigrants.

Conclusion

As an immigrant writer with South Asian roots, Bharati Mukherjee in her novels make a concerted effort to conceptualize the image of the immigrants, who assert their claim to an American identity by struggling heroically to reinstate themselves successfully in a new cultural landscape. The experience of the South Asian diasporic women is one in which the psyche is always 'in between' worlds, where time and space have created a sense of psychological uncertainty. While this state of uncertainty often disorients the individual, making one subject to an indeterminate identity, it also allows her to exist as many, expressing the voices of the multitudes that lie within her, and promising to sound the voices of those selves that have yet to be discovered. 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 favor of an evolving consciousness of coexistence; cross-cultural transition is an interactive, dialogic, two-way process rather than a simple, active-passive relation. Bharati Mukherjee's characters with different socio-cultural experiences relate to a process involving complex negotiation and exchange.

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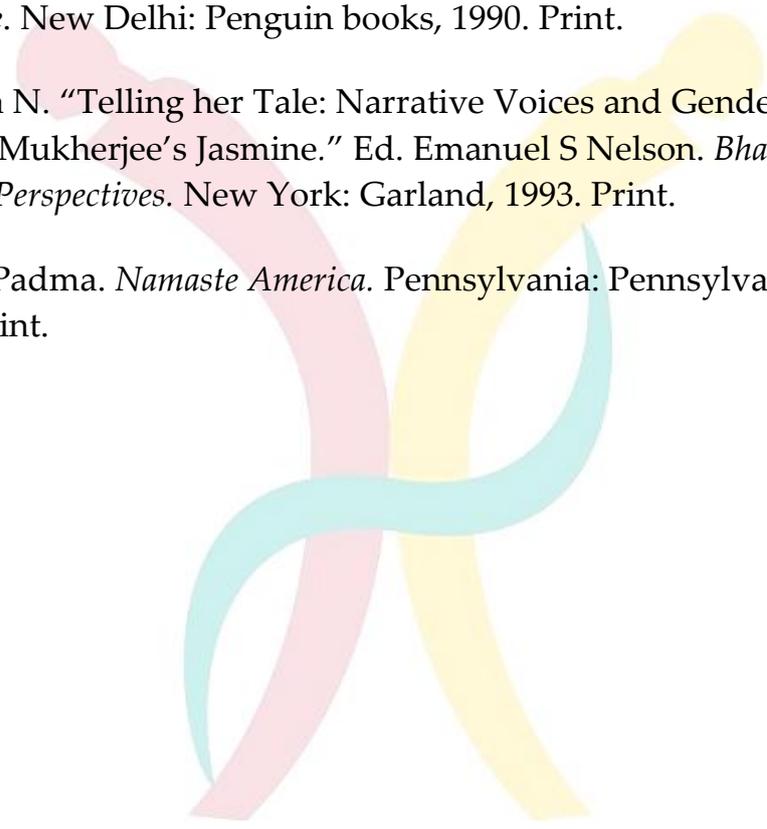
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