

**"EAST - WEST ENCOUNTER: PLIGHT AND PANACEA" IN INDIAN
WRITINGS – SELECT NOVELS OF BHARATHI MUKHERJEE**

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ABSTRACT: Bharathi Mukherjee one of the most powerful contemporary Indian novelists and a diasporic writer of Indian origin depicts the world of immigrants and cross cultural crises in her novels. According to her, as women have experiences of displacement and dislocations in personal lives, they are better suited for adaptability in an alien culture. Her novels, honestly, depict the issues of her own cultural location in West Bengal in India, her displacement (alienation) from her native land to Canada where she was “simultaneously invisible” as a writer and “overexposed” as a racial minority and her final re-location (assimilation) to USA as a naturalised citizen. Even after four decades she continues to write about India and Indian immigrants to the west. Her voice tells the tales of her own experiences to display the changing silhouette of American Society. The present study is an attempt to read the mindset of the protagonists in the novels – ‘*Wife*’ and ‘*Tiger’s Daughter*’ of Bharathi Mukherjee, who are wedged between the two cultures of the East and the West.

Key words: immigrants, displacement, silhouette, wedged, alien

The encounter with the west provided an opportunity to the educated Indian intellect to synthesize the Eastern spiritual values with the Western modern trends to the advantage of the natives. No less a person than Swami Vivekananda, one of the greatest interpreters of India, felt that the English language was the most effective instrument of disseminating Indian thought and said, “The Anglo-Sexons have created

a future for India”. K.R.Srinivasa Iyengar observes that “English is the veritable Suez Canal for intellectual intercourse between the West and the East”. The introduction of English in India opened new vistas of knowledge to the Indians and enabled the voice of India to be heard by the rest of the world.

The Indian English Literature is one of the pioneering sects of world literature. The diasporic Indian writing covers every continent and every part of the world. ‘Indian Diaspora’ means population outside India, particularly of those who have migrated to foreign lands and in course of time renounced their Indian citizenship. The term stands for the fragments of Indian population outside India who have acquired the citizenship of the foreign countries and now belong to the country of their migration but can trace their origin from another land.

The Indian born writer Bharathi Mukherjee is one of the most widely known immigrant writers of America. Bharati Mukherjee, the Indian-American immigrant novelist clearly fits into the school of writers earlier called expatriate writers but later they are known as the writers of the Indian Diaspora. Bharathi Mukherjee’s creative output consists of novels such as, *The Tiger’s Daughter*(1971), *Wife*(1975), *Jasmine*(1989) and *The Holder of the world*(1993) and two works of non-fiction and two collections of short stories.

Due to geographical as well as psychological dislocation migrant people feel a sense of expatriate homeliness which causes alienation and loneliness. Some people are longing to go back, feels homesick because of lack of acceptance in a migrated country. Those who assimilate and acculturate the alien country lives in-between two identities whereas some creates homogeneity between two cultures. When a person leaves his own culture and enters another his old values come into conflict with the new ones he finds. This ‘Cultural transplantation’ leads to a crisis of identity and a final reconciliation to the choice.

The present paper is an attempt to understand the conflicts of the east-west encounter with special reference to the novels - *The Tigers Daughter and Wife* by Bharathi Mukherjee. A close experience of both the worlds – the western and the Indian gives Bharathi Mukherjee an authentic and objective perspective with the delicious combination of malice, charm, irony and sympathy. Bharathi Mukherjee, an exponent of expatriate writing takes up the life of the Indian immigrants in the U.S.A as the subject matter of most of her novels. The protagonists with their shifting

boundaries and conflictual encounters between different cultures is the focal point for analysis.

Mirroring her own life as an Indian immigrant to Canada and later the United States, many of Mukherjee's characters are Indian women who are victims of racism and sexism, often driven to desperate acts of violence after realizing they can fit into neither the culture of the West nor the Indian society they left behind. America has become the connoisseur of people all over the world. Migration of people to this dreamland has reached a new height. The migrated people find it difficult to adjust with the new culture and undergo cultural transformation. In this process, they lose the roots of their native culture.

Every culture has its own strengths and weaknesses. The immigrants often try to find a sync between the native culture and the adopted one. This results in psychological eccentricities that are alien to both the cultures. Hence the solution to this problem is retaining one's culture as far as possible even while living on an alien soil. When subjugated to cultural confrontation, imbibing the qualities of 'other' culture is the only way to keep a fine balance between illusion and reality and lead a meaningful life preserving his own identity as well.

The twentieth century has witnessed massive migratory movements of various people across national and continental boundaries. The reasons for the migration of people of various nations vary from one another and the destinations they reach also differ. Yet all immigrants' experiences share certain fundamental characteristics. They face racial problems, cultural shock, sense of alienation, nostalgic memories of their native lands and the trauma of displacement common to the people of various diaspora.

Bharathi Mukherjee deals with the problems of the Indian immigrants mainly, women. Her novels reflect the temperament and mood of the present American society as experienced by the Indian immigrants in America. It also deals with liberated identity of women characters. She portrays them as victims of alienation, expatriation and identity crisis. These women keep struggling for their identity, undergo psychological suffering and they finally come out as self-assertive individuals free from the shackles of relationships of the past.

Wife is the simple story of Amit and his wife Dimple, newly married immigrants to the United States. Amit and Dimple leave their country in search of their dreams. This migration or cultural transplant leads to a crisis of identity and also affects their relationship as husband and wife. Mukherjee depicts the mental breakdown of a weak-

mindful young woman who cannot cope with the traumatic experience of immigration from the structured society of India to the liberated society of New York City.

Dimple's life in New York appears destructive to her. When she comes into contact with the American culture she gets herself baffled immediately. She is further shaken by the realisation that New York with all its glitter is a crime-prone city, allowing little freedom to Indian wives. She experiences total estrangement from herself and her surroundings as well. In America, she cannot come to terms with either her own culture or America's culture. She tries to find out an identity by having an illicit relationship with Milt. Dimple due her boredom and lack of concern that she expects from her husband turns desperate. Her quest for self-realisation ends in murder of her husband.

Aggravated by the hostile pressures of immigration, she kills a cockroach, a pregnant mouse, her own foetus, and at last her life partner Amit. Murdering Amit symbolizes a way for Dimple to get rid of Indian values. Alienation, depression, isolation, uprootedness, and identity crisis, all these are the elements of expatriate sensibility and all these get synthesized in Dimple and she stands as an expatriate in a true sense.

The Tiger's Daughter deals with the immigrant experience of the protagonist Tara who gets her education in New York.. Tara's hasty marriage to David bristles with a lot of troubles because her husband is completely western and she is incapable of corresponding with him the finer nuances of her family environment and of life in Calcutta. In India a marriage is a coming together of two families. But in America, a marriage is just a bond connecting two individuals. Due to isolation, desolation, loss of identity, and total anonymity in America Tara feels apprehensive in a strange environment. So she chooses to go back to India and belong there.

The wistful, passionate sensitivity of an immigrant for her mother country is dashed to pieces when it comes into direct blows with reality. The epidemics, collision, fatal accidents and starvation of Calcutta, the omnipresence of her husband David in the midst of rioting rabble and her own westernization over the period of seven years add to her anguish and misery. With coming back to India, America looks like a dreamland to Tara. Disappointed by her visit to her home town after seven years, in the altered status of the immigrant wife of an American, Tara feels to go back to USA. The Pre-colonial ancient culture and the current aping of western pop-culture bring in a dilemma in the mind of Tara. The Cultural, racial and communal conflict in Tara takes place as a result of her immigration and her subsequent marriage to an American.

Tara's mind is constantly at conflict with the two personalities— one of an Indian and the other of an American. Caught in the gulf between these two contrasting worlds, Tara feels that she has forgotten many of her Hindu rituals of worshipping icons, she had seen, her mother performing since her childhood. Tara has been shown as shuttling between the world of alienation and the world of belonging - the European world and the Indian world. This shuttling between the two worlds contributes to her split personality. Tara's journey to India proves as a quest for self and her immigrant psyche which proves frustrating slowly leads her to illusion, alienation, depression and finally to return back to her husband.

Dimple and Tara make an expedition to the United States for diverse reasons and under diverse conditions. They pass through so many tribulations. Tara and Dimple become isolated rootless aliens because of their hesitant outlook to their native tradition as well as the culture of the New World. It is really heartening to note that both Dimple and Tara show the presence of Indian values despite their over-exposure to the alien culture, but they fail to find a balance between the two cultures

While Tara rethinks of her journey to America with the murder of her friend, Dimple sinks into depression and proves her helplessness and hopelessness by murdering Amit. Tara wakes out of her depression and starts recognising that her true life waits in America which she had detested earlier and Dimple feels guilty because of her isolation and wretchedness.

A close experience of both the worlds – the western and the Indian- by Bharathi Mukherjee – gives an authentic and objective perspective to look at India from a western point of view and look at the west from an Indian point of view.

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