

## **Cross Culturalism in the Novels of Bharti Mukherjee**

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Bharti Mukherjee soon occupied a prominent place among the Indian English novelists and with her novels she has strengthened the tradition of Indian women novelists writing in English. It was certain on that time, Indian English novel took shape and the most remarkable feature about it was the fact that women novelists did not lag behind their male counterparts in this venture. Toru Dutt, who has the claim to be among the earliest Indian English poets, was also the first noted Indian English woman novelist. It is in fact in the post-independence period that English fiction at the hands of Indian women novelists came of age. Novels written by Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shanta Rama Rao, Attia Hussain and others enriched Indian English fiction beyond recognition. The second generation of post-Independence Indian English women novelists took it to new heights. Novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy and Namita Gokhale have added new dimensions of experience and sensibility to it. The Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s which stormed the Western world and works of writers like Germaine Greer, Kate Millet, Adrienne Rich and Betty Freidan and which made women look at their lives from a new perspective did not influence Indian women in the same way or scale. Yet, in the writings of women novelists of the period a feminine perspective on the world was gradually manifesting itself which was new to Indian English writing. Feminism was yet to make an overt impact on the women novelists, but their fiction indicates a consciousness of women's

issues that sets them apart not only from their male counterparts but also from women novelists of the earlier generation. The new generation of women writers began the task of unveiling the truth in the lives of Indian women. The feminine psyche in Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherji and Shashi Deshpande is expressed through the subjective, stream of consciousness mode while the moderate stance of writers like Jhabvala, Markandaya and Nayantara Sahgal are presented through objective narration. The women novelists of the post-Independence era reflect dual aspects of the feminine psyche - one which accepts the male definitions and identity and the other, the androgynous aspect that revolts against the traditional constraints that obstruct a woman from making her own choice and living life on equal terms with men. In the post-Independence period woman's quest for an identity became a recurring motif with women novelists. Women began to protest against the injustices heaped upon them in an orthodox society.

Mukherjee's works focus on the "phenomenon of migration, the status of new immigrants, and the feeling of alienation often experienced by expatriates" as well as on Indian women and their struggle (Alam 7).

Her own struggle with 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).

Biographer Fakrul Alam's categorizes Mukherjee's life into three phases, and her fiction can be interpreted with this schema as well. Her earlier works, such as the *The Tiger's Daughter* and parts of *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, are her attempts to find her identity in her Indian heritage.

The Tiger's Daughter is about a young girl named Tara who returns to India after many years of being away only to return to poverty and turmoil. This story parallels Mukherjee's own return to India with Clark Blaise in 1973 and she was deeply affected by the chaos and poverty of Indian and mistreatment of women in the name of tradition. She writes that "what is unforgivable is the lives that have been sacrificed to notions of propriety and obedience" (Days and Nights 217). However, her husband became very intrigued by the magic of the myth and culture that surrounded every part of Bengal. These differences of opinion, her shock and his awe, are seen in one of their joint publications, Days and Nights in Calcutta.

The second phase of her writing encompasses works such as Wife, the short stories in Darkness, an essay entitled "An Invisible Woman" and The Sorrow and the Terror, a joint effort with her husband. These works originate in Mukherjee's own experience of racism in Canada, where despite being a tenured professor, she felt humiliated and on the edge of being a "housebound, fearful, aggrieved, obsessive, and unforgiving queen of bitterness"(Mukherjee, qtd. in Alam 10).

After moving back to the United States, she wrote about her personal experiences. One of her short stories entitled "Isolated Incidents" explores the biased Canadian view towards immigrants that she encountered, as well as how government agencies handled assaults on particular races. Another short story titled "The Tenant" continues to reflect on her focus on immigrant Indian women and their mistreatment. The story is about a divorced Indian woman studying in the States and her experiences with interracial relationships. One quotation from the story hints at Mukherjee's views of Indian men as being too preoccupied to truly care for their wives and children:

"All Indian men are wife beaters,' Maya [the narrator] says. She means it and doesn't mean it."

In *Wife*, Mukherjee writes about a woman named Dimple who has been oppressed by such men and attempts to be the ideal Bengali wife, but out of fear and personal instability, she murders her husband and eventually commits suicide. The stories in *Darkness* further endeavor to tell similar stories of immigrants and women.

In her third phase, Mukherjee is described as having accepted being "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants" (M. qtd in Alam 9). She claims an American identity and not a hyphenated Indian-American one:

I maintain that I am an American writer of Indian origin, not because I'm ashamed of my past, not because I'm betraying or distorting my past, but because my whole adult life has been lived here, and I write about the people who are immigrants going through the process of making a home here... I write in the tradition of immigrant experience rather than nostalgia and expatriation. That is very important. I am saying that the luxury of being a U.S. citizen for me is that can define myself in terms of things like my politics, my sexual orientation or my education. My affiliation with readers should be on the basis of what they want to read, not in terms of my ethnicity or my race.(Mukherjee qtd. in Basbanes)

Mukherjee continues writing about the immigrant experience in her novel *Jasmine* and most of the stories in *The Middle Man and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories which won her the 1998 National Book Critics Circle Award for Best Fiction. *Jasmine* develops this idea of the mixing of the East and West by telling the story of a young Hindu woman who leaves India for the U.S. after her husband's murder, only to be raped and eventually returned to the position of a caregiver through a series of jobs.

Mukherjee's focus continues to be on immigrant women. She also uses the female characters to explore the spatio-temporal (Massachusetts to India) connections between different cultures. In *Leave It to Me*, Mukherjee tells the story of a young woman sociopath named Debby DiMartino, who seeks revenge on parents who abandoned her. The story reveals her ungrateful interaction with kind adoptive parents and a vengeful search for her real parents (described as a murderer and a flower child). The novel also looks at the conflict between Eastern and Western worlds and at mother-daughter relationships.

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