

# “SINGING IN A STRANGE LAND: CULTURAL DISSONANCE IN BHARATI MUKHERJEE’S NARRATIVES”

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**Abstract :** Bharati Mukherjee, the Indian born American writer, appears to believe that an immigrant because he or she belongs to two or more subject-positions is able to have a multidimensional view and a “less orthodox” vision of the world that is available to those who stay at “home”. Mukherjee seems to believe that immigration more often than not offers a ‘second chance’ where protagonists can create a new American identity by struggling “heroically” to make their relocation in a new territory work for them, even if their struggles do not always produce the desired results’

Much modern literature has been produced by immigrant writers narrating the experiences of their personal and collective confrontation with an alien culture as also their efforts at “holding on to” and “letting go” of the native culture. Yet these literary productions go beyond simple recounting of experiences in narrative form. For any aesthetic production involves a dual process: the artist derives his material and impressions from life and is guided by certain intellectual evaluation. The impressions are acquired from life but are also transmuted by the artist’s imagination. The images may be a reflection of reality but they also transcend reality and acquire a self of their own, living simultaneously at two levels “the world of facts and the world of fancies.” However, almost all carry an autobiographical element. In analyzing the writings of Asian American writers and their literatures Craig Tapping says:

Its forms are multiple and in many traditional and some newly created genres; but an autobiographical impulse- the desire to name experience and to create identity, to emerge from the dominant language and gaze of ‘non-ethnic’ America-impels even the shortest fictions, despite frequent disclaimers by the writers”. (*Reworlding*286)

The problem of aesthetic production here is comparable to the biblical query “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalms 137). The essay seeks to discuss how Bharati Mukherjee, in her narratives, sees crisis in identity as a collective cultural crisis of immigration. The operative trope in Mukherjee’s writings is a condition of chronic loss: namely loss of one’s identity, home, and culture.

The immigrant carries with him the baggage of a national identity as well as a cultural identity. The national identity is defined by the national boundaries from which the immigrant has his origin. But after immigration they reside in another world forming their own geographic boundary figuratively. For they are in a state where they belong neither to the third world nor to the First World (America in Mukherjee’s case) to which they have emigrated.

Mukherjee and other explicitly Indo-American writers belong to the ‘Fifth World’: that of the economically and politically displaced immigrants of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, transposed into alien contexts from where they redefine and newly construct alternative identities and communities.(Artherin Tapping 287-288)

To understand national identity, it is important that we understand the relationship between nation and the exilic condition. As Edward Said in his essay “The Mind of Winter’ points out:

Nationalism is an assertion of belonging to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture and customs; and by so doing, it fends off the ravage of exile. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the interplay between nationalism and exile is like Hegel’s dialectic of servant and master, opposites informing and constituting each other. (50)

Said goes on to say “...exile is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being: exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (51)

It is this cutting off from roots, that results in the exile’s being engaged with a consciousness of his ‘self’ or ‘identity’: the nation and culture of which he is a product. Identity or the distinct character belonging to an individual is forged both on the basis of his inherent traits as well as from the socio-cultural milieu in which he has his upbringing.

Identity is the process of synthesis between inner life and outer social reality as well as the feeling of personal continuity and consistency within oneself. It refers to the sense of having a stake in oneself, and at the same time in some kind of confirming community.” (SudhirKakar 2)

Immigration engenders a situation where one’s “selfness”/identity is at stake when an immigrant is confronted with an alien society, particularly one that he considers superior both politically and economically. Mukherjee characters grapple with a problem of cultural crisis they are faced with in their effort at re-rooting themselves in the American soil. Their identity then suffers a two-way crisis. They recoil at the ignominy and the indignity that they have to suffer at the hands of the dominant culture: as the recruiter in the short story ‘Tamurlaine’ puts it “your dignity is on the line every time you step outside your door” (105). On the other hand, Mukherjee points out in the introduction to *Darkness* “If you have wonder, if you keep looking for signs, if you wait surrendering little bits of a reluctant self every year, clutching the souvenirs of an ever-retreating past - you will never belong anywhere.” This dual sense of wanting to belong and yet neither resisting change, places the immigrant in a situation where he can neither fully be an immigrant nor remain an expatriate. “The word “expatriate” (one who lives away from one’s native land) most resonantly evokes the issue of identity, ranging from a relatively reconciled sense of self - belonging to two or more geographical areas, two intensely conflicting, often shattering feelings of un-belonging and alienation.’ (Ketu H. Katrak, R. Radhakrishnan). Sensitive to this two-fold states of the exilic condition Mukherjee advocates the conscious birth of a new cultural identity where the past (Indian-ness) does not deter one from but rather becomes a creative source for assimilation, where one’s past identity does not become an “albatross” hanging like a burden but regenerates and enriches the dominant culture. As Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out:

An immigrant, no matter how reluctant an exile, usually undergoes a process of naturalization. The naturalized American – and what an ironically inept term that is, for there is nothing natural about the process of Americanization- is proud to be an American now, just as simultaneously there is in him those other selves that will always escape being an American. In a nation of immigrants, there must therefore always be already that straining against the grain, the self that is assimilated and the self that remains inassimilable. This self that escapes assimilation, I believe renews American culture, making it ready for the future. Even as each new generation of immigrants casts away its old selves in the fresh American present, so American culture casts away its old self in the presence of ne Americans. (Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *The Ambivalent American*, p-18-9)

This assumption goes against the paradigm of the ‘melting pot’ theory given by cultural historians like Crevecoeur; “that tremendous stewing machine into which all the ingredients are combined and fused into a futuristic alloy” (Geok-lin Lim 19). The idea of ‘melting’ was originally espoused by Crevecoeur in his “Letters from an American Farmer” published in 1782. However, Crevecoeur talks here only about the process of melting and shies away from using the word pot. Rather Crevecoeur asks a vital question “what then is the American, this new man?” The question obviously concerns ‘the genesis of a new man, or the rebirth, the palingenesis of the old-world migrant that takes place in America’ observes Werner-Sollors. (Beyond Ethnicity p-75). Crevecoeur goes on to answer his question pointing out:

He is an American, who, leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rant he holds. He becomes and American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world. Americans are the western pilgrims, who are carrying along with them that great mass of arts, sciences, vigour, and industry which began long since in the east; they will finish the great circle. (Crevecoeur in Sollors p-76)

Sollors points out that Crevecoeur lays emphasis on the ‘gender symbolism’ here as ‘the migrant, imagined as man, becomes American by “being received” in the “broad lap of our great Alma Mater” (76) giving rise to the idea “of continental sexual procreation and birth.” (*The Lady of the Land* Annette Kelodry in Sollors 76). The idea of the “pot” which was later added in Israel Zangwill’s play *The Melting Pot* first published in 1909, may have had its origin from his idea of “procreation” and “rebirth”. As Sollors observes ‘The cultural affinities of wombs and pots have been described in great detail by anthropologists and psychologists alike’; (77). In Israel Zangwill’s play the protagonist David Quixano, a Jewish American whose parents are killed in an anti-Semitic pogrom falls in love with the daughter of an anti-Semitic baron called Verna Ravendal and is betrothed to her. At the end of the play David looking at the sunset in the distance says:

It is the fires of God round His crucible.... There she lies, the great melting-pot. Listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling?

According to Sollors, Zangwill’s play, apart from proclaiming any “social or political theory” became the focus on which revolved much discussion and arguments over the concept of immigration and ethnicity, including most notably the language of self-declared opponents of the melting-pot concept’ (66). Sollors also goes on to say that ‘In his afterward of January 1914 to *The Melting-Pot*, Zangwill emphasized that assimilation is a pervasive and irresistible phenomenon’. (71)

The Melting-Pot theory thus assumes that immigrants must pour themselves into their great Melting-Pot called America where their native past shall be obliterated and by melting with the dominant culture must fuse completely to give rise to what

Crevecoeur Calls the 'New Man'. Zangwill's protagonist David envisions this 'New Man' residing in a new 'Republic of Man' and at a poignant moment describes it to his beloved Vera.

Yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross-how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! Here shall they all write to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God. Ah! Vera, what is the glory of Rome and Jerusalem where all nations and races come to worship and look back, compared with the glory of America, where all races and nations come to labour and look forward! (19-20)

Geok-in Lim goes further to assert that when Crevecoeur wrote his "Letters from an American Farmer" 'the notion of all nations was limited to Europe;' Crevecoeur and his creed had neither foreseen nor perhaps anticipated other immigrants both legal and illegal who have penetrated into America from different continents of the world, the largest of these being the influx from the continent of Asia-"people Crevecoeur did not identify as Americans because they were not here, or were here as livestock were here, as slaves, without human and national identity" (Geok-in Lim 20).

Bharti Mukherjee's diasporic version of home and identity defies and goes beyond the dictates of the melting pot theory. Hers is the poetics of 'assimilated' and 'assimilable'. She sees her 'Indian-ness' not as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliteration (or worse a "visible" disfigurement to be hidden); rather she 'see(s) it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated'. When an immigrant seeks to settle in the new world, he passes through a process which is similar to what Edward Said describes as "conscious affiliation," where there is "a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed." Having been geographically displaced, the Indian immigrant in U.S.A. faces the problem of resolving an effective 'identifying' relationship between self and space. He has to meet the challenges of a 'supposedly superior racial or cultural model.' Mukherjee sees in this confrontation a scope for cultural interface which provides space for cultural re-creation. The term diaspora comes from the Greek source 'dia' which means 'apart' and 'speirein' which suggest 'to scatter' or 'to sow'. Bharati Mukherjee emphasizes the 'speirein' segment of the word which promises the possibility of replanting, re-rooting and ensuring subsequent growth and development, Mukherjee's construction of diaspora: 'a chosen condition of being' calls for an ongoing negotiation, where coming to America becomes a trope which dramatizes a march from the state of "homelessness" to "home coming". Her fiction becomes the locus of the cultural interface between these two modes of being.

Mukherjee's characters, the first-generation immigrants straddling between two identities, are constantly negotiating their two selves, the native and the foreign. The protagonists in her first three novels grapple with this problem. They represent the stages of this progress from exile to immigrant to natural citizenship. Her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter*, written according to Mukherjee, from the omniscient point of view and plenty of irony, is about a young woman of Indian origin who returns to her home country after spending seven years in the United States first as a student at Vassar and then as a wife to a white American. Tara Banerjee Cartwright is the only daughter of a rich landlord of Bengal, whose lifestyle and living conditions are still reminiscent of his British colonial past. Returning to Calcutta to visit her family, Tara becomes painfully aware that while she has not yet eased herself into American culture, she no longer derives sustenance from the values and mores of her native land. Having spent seven years in the U.S., having to fend for herself and having to defend her way of life and her Third-World origin, she has acquired a keener perception of her native land. She has a clearer vision of the artificiality of the lives of her British -School-tutored friends in contrast to the violence, poverty and sorrow-ridden life of those compatriots that her sheltered upbringing had blinded her to. Her identity has undergone a change as she can neither sympathize with the narrow-minded views of her friends at the Hotel Catelli-continental who refuse to seek beyond the four walls of their protected class, nor can she deal comfortably with the negative comments made by her American husband David about her country and its ethos. It is her exilic position which both sensitizes her to her country wrought by violence, rebellion and poverty, and also makes her nostalgic for the safe haven in Camac Street in Calcutta where she spent her childhood. As a fifteen-year-old she had been sent to America by her father, for higher studies.

The motives for that decision remained his secret, but its consequences were terrifying. It had put a rather fragile young woman on a jet for Poughkeepsie and left out of account the limits of courage and common sense. (50)

The fear and pain of her expatriate condition she found difficult to communicate through letter. Her Camac Street friends still wrote to her religiously.

In their letters they complained wittily of boredom in Calcutta, the movies at the Metro, the foul temper of the whiskered nun from Mauritius, the weather's beastliness, but not once did they detect Tara's fears. These friends who had never left home envied her freedom; they asked for records and transparent nighties..... Tara saw herself being pushed to the periphery of her old world, and to same herself she clung to the loyalties of the Camac Street girls. (10)

On the other hand, she failed to communicate with the other resident girls- "how could Tara share her Camac Street thoughts with the pale, dry skinned girls the same way they shared their Alberto VO<sup>5</sup> in the shower?" (11) . Tara's exilic condition ironically alienates her from both the country of her origin as well as America, her adopted country of domicile by virtue of her

marriage to David. A deep sense of loss assails her as she realizes that she no longer can derive either sympathy or consolation from her American husband nor from her upper-class Calcutta friends who ironically envy her immigrant status in the U.S. and see it as a fulfillment of the dreams they have been harbouring since their British-school colonial upbringing. The most poignant aspect of her exilic condition is a profound sense of loss of her past. As Salman Rushdie points out in "Imaginary Homelands" "... if we look back, we must also do so in the knowledge which gives rise to profound uncertainties that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; ...." (10)

However, despite the loss of her secure childhood Tara's appraisal of the India of her past is merely an objective account which a keener sensitivity of her bi-national self is capable of analyzing, involving no conflict between the two cultures. Mukherjee herself points out in an interview with Sybil Steinberg in the Publishers Weekly (Aug 25, 1989) about her first novel.

It is the wisest of my novels in the sense that I was between both worlds. I was detached enough from India so that I could look back with affection and irony, but I didn't know America long enough to feel any conflict. I was like a bridge poised between two cultures. (4)

Speaking about her protagonist Dimple Dasgupta in her second novel Wife, Mukherjee says to Steinberg that she goes through 'feminist and immigrant crises'. Dimple's marriage with Amit Basu arranged and solemnized in India takes a sudden turn and threatens to fall apart as the couple immigrates to settle in New York. The disintegration begins as Dimple refuses to remain in the Indian ghetto of Queens and model herself along the lines of other traditional Indian wives who are subservient to and respectful of their husbands. Choosing rather to get out of the Ghetto she aspires to live the kind of American life portrayed on television soap operas. She feels betrayed by her husband, as he is unable to provide her with such a life. Frustrated by her unfulfilled dream she devises various methods of ending her life, but in a fit of madness kills her husband instead as he appears to her to be major obstacle in her path to freedom that the new world of America offers. Critics have often held the view that Dimple's madness seems a little contrived and unconvincing. However, Willa Swanson is of the view that the success of Wife lay in providing the reader with "an insight into the sudden, seemingly inexplicable, explosion of a docile, passive person into violence." (Antioch Review, Spring 1976, 380) The novel ends in the protagonist's madness leading to her husband's murder. However, Mukherjee's diasporic poetics, offers a positive view of the immigrant experience where immigration and diasporization is seen as a 'belief in a second chance'.

Of course, one could argue that Dimple's desperate step could be seen as a march towards further Americanization and perhaps remaining in the ghetto of Queens along with other Bengali wives may have been a better option as the ghetto would have acted as an emotional cushion, which would curb her insanity. But Mukherjee's contention seems to be that remaining in the ghetto would have offered her fewer chances as even before her departure from India, Dimple had deliberately terminated her pregnancy as she refused to carry anything old into her new life. Her tendency towards violence was not as result of her attempt at Americanization but rather was a consequence of her discontentment with the ghetto mentality which in the absence of an alternative mode of life led her to be seeped in by the second-hand and one-dimensional view of America represented on television soap-operas and newspapers.

Talking about murders in America was like talking about the weather, and she was glad that an elderly couple had been fatally shot on a fishing trip so that she did not have to feel guilty about Amit. (99)

It is in this negative aspect of America, its love life, licentiousness, illegitimate pregnancies, and murder that her already disoriented mind finds a solution in and ultimately moves her to kill her husband rather than commit suicide.

Jasmine, the eponymous protagonist of her third novel, comes from a rural background from the village of Hasnapur in Punjab unlike her two counterparts who have had an upper middle class colonial upbringing. Yet of all the three women she proves to be the strongest and more capable of a stoic acceptance and keen adaptability on the foreign soil. In her relentless determination to survive the horrors that befall her – which include the violent death of her husband not long before the couple's scheduled departure from India and her rape by a Vietnam veteran upon her arrival in Florida, Jasmine finds herself forever on the move, traveling first to Queens, to Manhattan and then to an Iowa farming community, before setting off at the end of the novel to California. After each experience a small part of Jasmine, who was born Jyoti, is transformed, and so she becomes, at various points throughout the course of the novel. Jazzy, Jase and finally Jane. By tacitly agreeing to pay any price for the freedom that America offers anyone who lives within its borders, Jasmine becomes one of Mukherjee's "new pioneers". As Eleanor Wachtel explained in her review of the novel in 'Macleans' (October 23, 1989) "By the time the novel's complex textured and violent story comes to a close, Jasmine is still 'greedy with wants and reckless from hope.'"

Jasmine's transformation begins even before she leaves India, when she contrives her marriage with Prakash, an engineer, who dislikes the feudalistic mentality of traditional India and renames her from Jyoti to Jasmine. However, after his sudden and violent death at the hands of Sikh terrorists Jasmine seems to revert back to her feudalistic past as she audaciously decides to carry her husband's new suit to Tampa in America where her husband was to study, to burn it on the campus and to commit 'suttee; a practice of self-immolation on the husband's pyre practiced in ancient India.

The actual process of metamorphosis in her is set off by her rape upon her reaching the shores of Florida, when she decides to dump her baggage, burn it and proceed to travel light. The loss of her baggage becomes a symbol of her willingness to lose her

“cherished ‘cultural moorings, a cause for permanent alienation” in a foreign soil. She also chooses to defy her fate and the Lord of Death. Yama, and to start life afresh:

I buttoned up the jacket and sat by the fire. With the first streaks of dawn, my first full American day, I walked out the front drive of the motel to the highway and began my journey, traveling light. (108)

Carmen Wickramagamage points out that the act of murder, as against suicide committed by Jasmine, is ‘her mode of resistance’. ‘She chooses murder, and that act seems to enable her to assume a protean identity, the shape of which is determined as much by her own needs at a particular moment as by the requirements of her location.’ (173)

Jasmine’s sense of self, informed and shaped by her present location on the American soil undergoes a drastic change. Picked up by a benefactress Lilian Gordon from a dirt trail of Florida farmlands she undergoes her first change of identity as the American lady (whom she calls a facilitator) teaches her to walk American, dress American in ‘T-shirt, tight cords and running shoes’ and talk American along with renaming her from Jasmine to Jazzy. Lilian Gordon equips her with the essential behavioral tools as a necessary survival strategy to live as an immigrant in an alien country. From thereon she moves to reside with Prof. Vadhera, her dead husband’s mentor and benefactor, in the Indian ghetto in Queens, New York where she is in a sense forced to resort back to a feudalistic mode of life and is expected to conform to her state of widowhood, that she thought she had left behind back in India. Refusing to revert back to her old self, she contrives, through blackmailing Prof. Vadhera, to secure a false Green-card which she sees as the only way of liberation from the Ghetto of Queens. Her next incarnations appear in the form of an au pair nurse to a six-year-old in an American family, the Hayses, and subsequently as a lover and care-giver to a crippled banker Bud Ripplemeyer in Iowa. However, her journey does not end there and by the end of the novel she is ready to embark upon another journey and perhaps another incarnation as she is willing to travel westward with Taylor. At each juncture of a fresh journey Jasmine seems to lose a little of her old self to facilitate her transfiguration into a new role. Carmen Wikramagamage is of the view that:

Jasmine is no doubt closer to Mukherjee’s vision of relocation as a positive experience that is Dimple. Dimple is portrayed as a woman who is prevented from engaging in new inscriptions of self by a hegemonic view of culture as God-given and natural, hence of cultural identities and values as also given and immutable. Jasmine is represented as someone who is able to occupy new subject-positions and to redefine old ones because she realizes that culture is man-made, and cultural identities and norms provisional, because they have their provenance in specific sociocultural locations and serve particular functions within them. (174)

In spite of the loss that they suffer, Mukherjee’s protagonists Tara, Dimple and Jasmine seem to confirm that her diasporic vision is an optimistic one which challenges earlier stereotypical images of immigrants as “put upon and pathetic” (Mukherjee, Introduction – xiii), and unable to cope with the demands of the host culture remain ‘alienated and lost’. Like Edward Said, she appears to believe that an immigrant because he or she belongs to two or more subject-positions is able to have a multidimensional view and a “less orthodox” vision of the world that is available to those who stay at “home” (Wickramagamage 172). Mukherjee seems to believe that immigration more often than not offers a ‘second chance’ where protagonists can create a new American identity by struggling “heroically” to make their relocation in a new territory work for them, even if their struggles do not always produce the desired results’ (Carb 654 in Wickramagamage 172)

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