



# CULTURAL CONFRONTATION IN SELECT NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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**Abstract:** Culture is the distinctive feature of a society. Each society can be differentiated from another based on their cultures. Each culture is unique in its own way and has to be preserved by that society Bharati Mukherjee's novels and short stories often reveal the emotional and psychic consequences of the search for self-identity in the alien land.

Mukherjee is at her best in the depiction of cross-cultural conflicts and how her heroines take control over their destinies. Cultural conflicts arise between individuals or social groups separated by cultural boundaries. Mukherjee admits that it is difficult for the Indian immigrant women to assimilate American values system sacrificing the soul of the Indian spiritual life. Cross- cultured confrontation is a great influence on immigrants today. The two protagonists of Mukherjee, Jasmine and Dimple face Cultural shock due to their immigration to the foreign land and who could not cope up with their changed circumstances and with the two socio-cultural environments accompanied with the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia.

**Keywords:** Cultural confrontation, immigrants, Diaspora, migration, Cultural shock

Culture is the way of life. It is the social behaviour shown by the people of a particular region according to the norms laid by the particular culture. Culture is the distinctive feature of a society. Each society can be differentiated from another based on their cultures. Each culture is unique in its own way and has to be preserved by that society. The present paper examines some common issues concerning cultural conflicts portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee through her novels.

Bharati Mukherjee was born in Calcutta on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 1940 into a Hindu- Bengali family. She is the second of the three daughters of Sudhir Lal Mukherjee and Bina Chatterjee. When Mukherjee was seven, her family moved to England. In 1951, her family moved back to India. In 1959, Mukherjee received a B.A with honours from the University of Calcutta and in 1961 she received her M.A English and Ancient Culture from the University of Baroda. Later that year she moved to the United States to attend Iowa Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. There she met Clarke Blaise, another writer whom she married and had two sons. She received her Ph.D. in English and Comparative Literature from the University of Iowa. Mukherjee immigrated to Canada with Blaise in 1968 and became a naturalized citizen in 1972. She was a Professor at McGill University in Montreal. She claims that racist experience in Canada prompted her to become a United State Citizen in 1980. She considers herself to be an American writer with Bengali -Indian

roots. Bharat Mukherjee is an American novelist, short-story writer, non-fiction writer and journalist. Her works mainly focus on the issues of Indian women and their struggle in the migration.

Bharati Mukherjee is the most successful woman of the Indian Diaspora. The term 'Diaspora' is originally used for the Jewish exilic diaspora from its homeland, is now applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates' refugees, exiles and immigrants. Today people all over the world are being nourished by the writers of the Indian diaspora namely

V.S. Naipaul, Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee etc. The voyagers, travelers, traders and the orientalist rediscovered the cosmopolitan culture of India. The writers of the Indian diaspora through their literary contributions have greatly enriched the English Literature. They write about the vastness and complexities of the home country which contains everything in multitudes like multiple truths, multiple crisis, multiple realities and this diversity is portrayed for the worldwide reading public.

With the wake of migration cultural conflict comes into light. It has become one of the core elements of Diaspora. Indian diasporic writers present migration predominantly in their writings and they introduce the culture of their country of origin through their characters. Indian diaspora has reached at its highest peak and Indian diasporic writers prominently speak either about their homeland culture or present voices of Indian immigrants. Cultural conflicts arise between individuals or social groups separated by cultural boundaries. The cultural boundaries consider language, religion, ethnicity and customs of immigration.

Bharati Mukherjee's novels and short stories often reveal the emotional and psychic consequences of the search for self-identity in the alien land. She has paid special attention to the condition of the Indian women immigrant in North America. Her novels express the nomadic impulses of Indians who in their deliberate search for a materially better life, migrate to the west consequently face tensions of adaptation and assimilation. Mukherjee is at her best in the depiction of cross-cultural conflicts and how her heroines take control over their destinies.

The novel 'Jasmine' discusses the story of an uneducated, simple but courageous Indian small town, over the emigration to the United States and finally to herself. She constructs dilemma of the young Punjabi widow who struggles with alternative identities for setting her roots in diverse cultural surroundings. Jasmine whose real name is Jyoti is a village girl from Hasnapur., Punjab India. At thirteen, her grandmother plans to get her married to a widower. Life changes to Jyoti when Prakash enters into her life. She falls in love with his voice and wishes to marry him. But Prakash hates Feudalism. He renames Jyoti's name as Jasmine. There by starts Jasmine's first identity crisis. She is shuttled between identities and displaces herself. Prakash wishes to live a real life. But fate plays the other wayround. Prakash is killed by a terrorist group called 'Khalsa Lions'. So, she decides to go to America to fulfill the mission of her husband.

The cultural displacement begins when Jasmine migrates to America without her husband and without a job. She travels three continents without fear. In Amsterdam she meets a railway porter. He introduces her to Half Face, the captain of the ship. The porter asked her not to believe the Half Face. But soon the half face rapes her in a motel. She tries to commit suicide by cutting her tongue but instead kills Half-

Face. An innocent Indian village girl changes into a murderer like Kali, the Goddess, who is the destroyer of evils. Hence Jasmine turns into Kali. After the murder she walks along the road and meets an old lady called, Lilliam Gordon saves her from death by starvation and fatigue.

Jasmine accepts the offer of caregiver to 'Duff', the daughter of American Tylor and Wylie. They call her Jase. Her attitude changes that she is neither Jasmine nor Jyoti. She is Jase now. She is earning and living for herself. Leaving Taylor's family, Jasmine was appointed as Teller in an Agricultural bank giving loans to farmers in Iowa. It was run by Bud Ripple Mayer. Bud's sons were farmers. Jasmine moves into Budd's house in order to take care of his aged mother. She was 'Jane' to Bud and he wanted to marry Jane despite their vast age difference. Though Bud helped her becoming financially secured, Jasmine was not ready to marry him.

Jasmine was often reminded of Hasnapur and Jalandhar. In an alien land, without education, without legal documents for her stay in US, Jasmine was exploited at all levels. The ship captain Half Face, an uncouth, destroyed Jasmine's vision. Wylie deserted her husband Taylor even before their divorce. She implied that it was Jasmine's entry which made the wedge wider between her husband and herself. Karin, Bud's first wife had divorced him, yet she was envious of Jasmine. Jasmine's adaptability to various situations raised envy among selfish people.

Life in America changes Jasmine subsequently and adapts herself to live there by changing her attitude. Unlike Jasmine, many immigrants struggle to live in a new custom.

But she is clear in her thoughts and learns the way to be rooted in the land. Mukherjee's migrated heroines suffer due to the cultural displacement as experienced by the author as an immigrant in America. Jasmine makes efforts to construct her professional identity in the family. Mukherjee admits that it is difficult for the Indian immigrant women to assimilate American values system sacrificing the soul of the Indian spiritual life.

Bharati Mukherjee's 'Wife' portrays the psychic condition of the protagonist Dimple due to cultural shock. 'Wife' is the simple story of Amit and his wife Dimple, newly married Bengali immigrants to the U.S.A. Dimple Dasgupta is an extremely immature girl who constantly dreams of marriage as she hopes it would bring freedom and love. She hoped that marriage would offer her a different kind of life. After a long physical waiting, she is finally married to Amit Kumar Basu, an average middle class young engineer who dreams of making a fortune in America and returning to India to lead a rich and comfortable life in Calcutta. But very soon her ideas on marriage are scattered, as her romantic, adolescent mind cannot grasp the reality that freedom has certain limitations. Marriage has not provided all the glittering things she has imagined. As a result, she begins to resent her new home. Amit, her husband does not seem to be capable of feeding her fantasy life. When she becomes pregnant, she decides not to bear any child. She induces an abortion to get rid of it. A child she feels, will be a deterrent to her movement of activity.

Dimple hopes that migration to the United States will benefit her in different ways. She believes that she will become a career woman. She likes to become a librarian there and to enrich her skills. But everything goes contradictory. Even her expected and favourite nuclear family with Amit does not seem to be

faithful at Manhaltan. In contrast Amit feels very comfortable in facing the challenges of living in the United States. But Dimple has got affected inevitable. The wheels of time change her too. Dimple slowly begins to adapt the western culture. She gets a new American friend Milt. The new friendship makes a

remarkable change in her attitude and behaviour. She begins to do things to please him. She tries to eat the American food for Milt. This shows that she tries to adapt to the new environment and mingle with the American society. But still Indianness stands in a corner of her mind and her conscience objects her actions. Her slow approval of Americanism shapes her to think Milt as a better choice than Amit.

Dimple is like Sita the epic character who accompanied her husband in exile.

But Dimple's character is not idealistic and she is not virgin like Sita. Her disappointment with Amit motivates her to go to the extent of killing her husband. Her action of killing her husband is not the first one, rather it is a second one she has aborted her baby before leaving India for the welfare of the husband. As a woman, Dimple is both constructive and destructive in her wifely and motherly role. The novel *Wife* portrays Dimple's sense of alienation which leads to disillusionment in her life.

### Conclusion

The unpleasant situation in America leads how to face the cultural disaster.

She is standing between the two nations to show her identity. The protagonists in *Jasmine* and *Wife* reveal dual identity and the struggle between the real and forced cultural differences exploit their inner psyche. They begin to wander between the real and fantasy world and they try to release her from all the imaginations. But the circumstances and the surroundings make them suffer. At times Bharati Mukherjee's chief interest appears lying in the study of the individual mentality, but then comes up as a much significant task of indulging the same individual into the contradictory forces of cross-cultural conventions. Cross-cultural confrontation is a great influence on immigrants today. The two protagonists of Mukherjee, *Jasmine* and *Dimple* face cultural shock due to their immigration to the foreign land and who could not cope up with their changed circumstances and with the two socio-cultural environments accompanied with the feelings of rootlessness and nostalgia. Thus, Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with the psychological supplication and crisis in the life of her protagonists.

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