

Multiculturalism in Bharati Mukherjee's Novels

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Abstract

Multiculturalism stands as a challenge to liberal democracy. In liberal democracies, all citizens should be treated equally under the law by abstracting the common identity of citizen from the real social, cultural, political and economic positions and identities of real members of society. Some more radical multicultural theorists have claimed that some cultural groups need more than recognition to ensure the integrity and maintenance of their distinct identities and contributions. Multiculturalism is the phenomenon of multiple groups of cultures existing within one society, largely due to immigrant communities. Their cultural identities reflected in every aspect of life- work ship, fellowship, leadership, religious, education, social justice etc. as a result of international migration, multiculturalism has become the dominant theory in some countries of western civilization. So, multiculturalism became prominent theme of some novels. Multiculturalism can restore cultural rights by emphasizing cultural equality and respect. In recent years the idea of multiculturalism has become a powerful and controversial influence in a variety of social and cultural territories. The present research work proposes to analyses and indicate the multicultural elements in the selected Indian English novels. The phenomenon of multiculturalism ad expatriation is by all means an old one. But its impact in the present times is larger and deeper.

Keywords: Culture, Multiculturalism, English Literature, Cross Cultural Conflict, Diasporic Writing.

Introduction :

Multiculturalism is both a response to the fact of cultural pluralism in modern democracies and a way of compensating cultural groups for past exclusion, discrimination and oppression. Multicultural ideologies or policies vary widely, ranging from the advocacy of equal to the various cultures in a society. It has been shaped by its long history, unique geography and diverse demography. The Indian society has been multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic from time immemorial. India has also encountered various kinds of divisiveness. The biggest challenge before countries like India is to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the main stream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism. It works on an assumption that minority groups are not treated on the same level as other citizens. Some critics contend that the multicultural argument for preservation of cultures is premised on a problematic view of culture and of the individual's relationship to culture. Cultures are not distinct, self-contained

wholes, they have long interacted & influenced one another through war, imperialism, trade & migration.

A cultururation, equivalent of assimilation, means that one group adapts its culture to the cultural ways of the dominant group, usually through the one-way process of socialization. Another term transculturation being closer in meaning with multiculturalism, indicates the reciprocal process by which two cultures engage themselves in a system, of give & take and adaptation to each other's way. It is two-way process of cultural exchange, where the various groups learn from each other, each impacting the other, without totally losing their unique distinctiveness. Multiculturalism is a dynamic concept that can energize the individual into searching for an authentic depiction of self & grouping. The terms Salad Bowl, Cultural mosaic & melting pot became popular in the theory of multiculturalism.

Multicultural Literature:

Multicultural literature is based on realism & its subject matter centers around issues related to race, class & gender. It shares some common themes in the writings of authors from many different

cultures like discovering personal identity in the society which marks multiculturalism, forming individual & cultural values, familial relationships, childhood games, folklore of the culture, societal pressures, rewards and punishments, religious background environmental adaptations that resulted from historical factors, socioeconomic changes, contact with other cultural group and forming personal relationships such as establishing family / marital roles, understanding gender roles, developing friendships and social groups and adapting to roles defined by age. Multicultural literature explores & opposing social injustice and cultural conflicts in the people of different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. The sense of collectiveness or communitarianism in multicultural literature relates the diaspora to homeland. The morphing of the world into a sprawling global village and free passage of people across terrains are changing the tenor of contemporary literature.

India unlike Australia, America, Britain does not have a rainbow population, so the impact of multiculturalism in contemporary Indian literature has been slow to seep in. It is just beginning to make its presence felt. Writers have started to trade in their identities to package it better in their literary pursuits so as to give their own places broader images, Capital-based novelist Rana Dasgupta said: "That last decade was reflective of this phenomenon when culture, its loss & revival through story telling became big literary themes". The decade was marked by the growth of new literary genres like the Chetan Bhagat phenomenon & chick literature. Such stories had to be told because the literary culture of India is broadening & changing writers are no longer trying to communicate what being an Indian is, but also India as a social and political entity.

Canadian writer Shandi Mitchell, whose book "Under This Unbroken Sky" won the best first book award in the Caribbean and Canadian region, in her country, multi-cultural experiment was two-pronged-one distinctly Canadian and the other, an assimilation of all that was Canadian by the culturally diverse communities. But each culture speaks to one another.

Indian English Literature:

India has several sophisticated literary languages. The languages have long-standing

literary traditions. It is assumed English is the main literary language in India because it has been given the status of "Official language" by the Indian Constitution. In reality, Indian English literature is the newest developed branch of Indian literature. For an Indian writing in English involves a conflict between the mother tongue & English, this other tongue which has been our intimate enemy during the last two centuries. English was introduced as a medium of instruction into the Indian education system in 1835 by Lord Macaulay. The British rule of India saw it as an intellectual tool to be used to civilize the natives. When English literature was included in School & University courses, India already had a long & rich tradition of literature at the juncture of this encounter was being written in more than a dozen living languages, but since English literature was produced in the country of the rulers and was praised by them, it immediately acquired a high cultural status in India.

Speaking of multicultural context with reference to Indian literature is different in some important ways from speaking of it in the context of other post-colonial literatures in English. In India there has been such a complex inter-relationship between various social, linguistic, racial and religious cultures & these distinguishable sub cultures are so numerous, that it is virtually impossible to fit them in a common formula of sociological linguistic or ethnic cultural structure. We should not compare simple multicultural context and complex multicultural contexts. In a society that speaks near 80 languages, writes its literature in nearly 25 different languages, has a history of large-scale, social migrations for every 2000 year, we find complex multicultural contexts.

An Indian, is inevitably bicultural & lives within a bilingual or a multilingual cultural idiom. He is born with a skill to switch his cultural-code according to the needs of his social situation. And even he lives within an organic & native social context, with many mainstream cultural traditions and several sub stream cultural currents. The traditional terms used in Indian languages that institutionalized these diverse pulls were Marga & Desi. The Marga being the cultures pervading the entire sub-continent horizontally & the Desi, being the vertical, local, fast-changing features of one's

cultural identity. Traditionally, the social mobility brought about by economic upheavals, religious conversions and linguistic affinity. It is possible to perceive this complicated social fragmentation & formation in terms of a tripartite relationship in the Marga traditions the alien traditions & the desi traditions. The alien traditions in India imitated in part the Marga traditions and in part Desi traditions. These were at once stylized, formalized & given a dominating place in Indian culture. English literature produced in India has acquired this double identity, at once stylized & pragmatic. There are some problems for Indian literature in English which are unique in the entire gamut of commonwealth writings. The mainstream being considered inherently superior. By imitating both, the alien traditions in India develop a compulsion to be a pan-Indian as well as true to the local nuances and the colour. The styles of Indian literature in English show clear signs of this compulsion. More than half a century both R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand still have to keep translating their regional concepts and terms into neutral English. The same problem is faced by a dialect writer in England or by a South American writer. The compulsion to write two-tonal, text-neutral and coloured does not come merely from the fact of the Indian writer's being bilingual/bicultural. V.S. Naipaul & Salman Rushdie, the non-typical Indian writers are bicultural, but they have evolved a complete style after escaping the cultural split that a typical Indian Writer has to suffer. It is because of this split that excessive stress has to be given on irony & humour, myth and rhetoric & verbal features of characters.

The English language in India is treated as a superior language in comparison with Indian languages. The Indian writer likes to claim it as his own Indian language at the same time he writes for the readership belonging to that social class. With this split, the Indian English style can barely become a discourse. The other problem of a serious nature by conflicting cultural demands on English literature in India is related to growth. The Indian nation has accepted the English language as one of its two national languages, the other being Hindi. But whereas Hindi is a regional language & has a specific geographical base but English does not. The result is that it is used, on the one hand, as a

language of status and on the other as a static language. Because of an international language it is called as status language & not being an Indian language it is more learnt than spoken in India, so it is a static language. It enjoys as an enormously resourceful language that it has been elsewhere. The inevitable consequences of this attitude in order to keep in with the international status of the language most writers assume a learned ironic tone at the same time, to rid of its statics, burden it with excessive local colour. A good example of these attitudes is Nissim Ezekiel's poems, in which ambivalence pervades the reproduction of somewhat comical but truly Indian use of English. The other example is Aurobindo's epic 'Savitri' written in Miltonic diction replete with references to the stylized folklore of the ancient past.

The entire history of Indian English literature of various patterns of conflict and collaboration between the Western, the Marga & the Desi cultural traditions, such a fate seems to have been inscribed in the being of Indian English literature from the moment of its birth. Briefly referring to the context of its birth Indian writers had acquired the skill of writing in alien languages much before the English languages arrived in India. Indian writers wrote using Arabic or Persian languages of alien extraction. Amir Khosrau of 13th c. and the Sanskrit poet Jagannath Pandit were bilingual, to mention just two of the numerous available examples, who wrote in languages other than their own. When English literature was introduced into Indian educational system there was no sense of outrage in contemporary Indian intellectuals. Thinkers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, some British ideologists inspired by Sir William Jones demanded education through the established medium of Arabic & Sanskrit. There was a conflict between the Western & Marga cultures. There were already well-established literary traditions in these languages such as Gujarathi, Tamil & Marathi. These were the Desi traditions. The final outcome of the debate was that the British administration in India decided to incorporate all the three components in the education system. Even today the official language policy of the Indian Government is known as the three-language policy. Because of the consistency of this policy from 1835 to this day. Indian writings in

English remains confined to all three cultural strands and works simultaneously within them all.

In India it is not possible to have a truly autonomous Indian English style. The desi culture emerged in India around the beginning on 20th c and have acquired and retained the sociological dents of all those centuries. The marga traditions emerged even earlier, and many are as old as Indian civilization itself. The three cultures originate in an agrarian a feudal & an industrialized society, respectively. Metaphorically speaking the body of modern Indian culture is draped in ancient shoes, a medieval gown & a modern hat. The problem is further complicated because the Indian sensibility invests disproportionate value in what is ancient even when it is unusable and also in what is young even when it is not fully mature. Indians learn foreign language very quickly. But these learned languages are always maintained as essentially foreign & imperfectly assimilated. The literature produced in India is traditionalized at a slow pace.

Cross Cultural Conflicts: (Bharati Mukherjee)

Bharati Mukherjee is one of the most remarkable writers of Indian diaspora. She has lived through several phases of expatriation, firstly as a colonial in British-ruled India, secondly the citizen of an independent India, thirdly as the post-colonial Indian in Canada & finally as the citizen of the USA. In her novels & short stories, she has dealt with the theme of expatriation and immigration. As a woman novelist, she usually focuses her attention on female protagonists & their problems. Her protagonists are quite powerful and dominant in her novels. She presents their conflicts and inner struggles. The novelists do not depict merely realities but inner currents of thoughts & feelings. Her novel Wife may be cited as a fitting example for portrayal of women's problems, like internal turmoil especially cultural conflict. In today's society women are seen as objects rather than human beings. Truly speaking women are the ones who should be treated as Goddesses, because no society or country can progress without an active participation of women in all walks of life. Women play a vital role both in the society and family affairs. Though they play many significant roles as daughter, wife, mother, daughter-

in-law and many other roles in society but they are still found suffering under the male chauvinistic society. This discrimination begins right from their childhood. Male superiority is forced upon them right from their innocence. They have no freedom or rights to do the things they like. All their creativity got submerged because of culture, tradition & the norms followed in the society. Women suffer so grievously in the society as well as in the hands of man. This suffering leads to Diasporic writing. Indian diaspora refers to the people who migrated from India to other countries in search of employment, better standards of living. When people move from their host land to alien land they face lot of sufferings like loneliness, discrimination, alienation, identity crisis. In the words of Prof. Sunita Nimavat, "Diasporic literature is concerned with the individual's or community's attachment to homeland and also a longing for belonging to the host country". The Indian diasporic women writers have a significant place in Indian diasporic writing. Some of the prominent Indian diasporic women writers are Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai etc. They unfold the emotional entanglements & the psychological anxiety involved in the immigrant experience. These writers portray modern Indian women attempt to free themselves economically, domestically and sexually from the male dominated society. The diasporic writers are often pre-occupied with the element of nostalgia as they seek to locate themselves in new culture. They often find themselves in new culture. And often find themselves getting struck between two cultures. So diasporic writing helps the writer and brings out the cultural conflict faced by the immigrant and it helps to build a novel with an image of India and abroad.

Bharati Mukherjee also expresses how Indians face the problems of adaption and survival in an alien land for their better life. She also brought down the cultural clash between the East and the West. When persons leave their own culture and enters into another culture, their original culture comes into conflict in the new alien land. This leads to search for self-identity which becomes as an important aspect in their life. In the novel Wife the protagonist wants to break through the traditional taboos of a wife. Dimple, a young Bengali girl, is

full of dreams about her marriage and the life to be led after marriage. When she marries Amit Basu, she visualizes a new life in America. But Amit expects Dimple to play the role of wife in the traditional way. But the circumstances around her made her follow the tradition of America and she does not claim to be as an Indian wife. This leads to utter despair and frustration, feeling of lost identity. Mukherjee effectively brings out the immigrant journey of her protagonist from India to America. Dimple's loneliness, fear & frustration made her to kill her husband, she was just unaware of the things happening around her. The full cycle of expatriation is presented in Wife that involves immigration, alienation, adaptation and assimilation.

Bharati Mukherjee's another novel is Jasmine. Jasmine is the protagonist of the novel. Being widowed at nearly the age of seventeen, Jasmine leaves India for the United States. Jasmine's journey towards the Western culture begins as her identity as a typical Hindu widow as she meets people like Taylor or Bud. Her identities as Jase, as Taylor called her, & Jane as Bud called her, are not only the reflections of her shifting identities but also her shedding one culture and adapting the other. The second instance of immigration in Jasmine's life seems to have much to do with culture and also with multiculturalism. When Jasmine returns from US to her family in India, she has to choose either performing Sati according to the rigid tradition of her family or to lead the life of Jasmine in America. So she becomes an illegal immigrant to Florida, symbolizing her journey of transformations, displacements and shifts of identities.

Conclusion:

To conclude, it may be said that as products of diaspora, Mukherjee's novels deal with nostalgia for a lost home, disillusionment of expatriation, fragmentation of the self, exuberance of immigration, assimilation, cultural translation and negotiation. Jasmine is Mukherjee's model of an assimilated immigrant. So, two of her novels Wife and Jasmine portrait the Journeys of two young women to the U.S.A. for different reasons, under dissimilar circumstances, both of them pass through physical, mental & emotional agony affecting their whole being to such an extent that they are driven to

violence. Women characters of Bharati Mukherjee like Tara, Dimple & Jasmine belong to different cultures are assimilated in the new culture and made efforts to make a new identity for themselves. This scenario is enacted in the new culture where adaptation and assimilation is not so very easy, wearies them down into violence and aggressiveness. This upbringing gives a very strong base to build a future for herself in a foreign land.

Cross-cultural conflict is the clash between two cultures where culture is the prime identity of human life. Cross-cultural conflict is the testimony of painful experience that imbibed by immigrants, who have faced several problems as psychological, social, global, economical and emotional on an alien land. Their painful experiences inspire many diaspora writers to share their varied experiences with world through their words. Cross-cultural, conflict explains the problems like psychological, sociological, ideological, religious and so on. Cultural problems are the highest-flying distinctiveness of Indian diaspora. Rootlessness is the most significant issue in the life of the immigrant. Cultural differences highlight man in the life of immigrants and they hang between homeland and adopted land and remain rootless in their entire life.

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