

Alienation or Assimilation: The Problem of Indian Diaspora in the Select Novel of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri

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Abstract

The migration of human beings has always been found in quest for a better life and future. Since the very beginning of the archaic world of human perception till today, the human migration has been continued in the exploration of better life, progress, prosperity, happiness and contentment but often it found only struggle and discontentment due to social, emotional or psychological disorder in the cultural background of detachment or alienation. Many branches of knowledge try to explore such migration in their terms and origination of human beings. In literature such migration comes to be studied under the head of Diaspora which deals with the literary sensibility of human beings and reveals certain features like nostalgia, homesickness, identity crisis, alienation, assimilation, cultural discourses and social upheavals that are fully responsible for the misfortunes of such migrant communities, located, dislocated and relocated without roots into the different parts of the world. The condition of such migrant people living under the umbrella of diaspora, has always been a dual state of mind which creates confusion and clashes into the sense of dislocation, alienation and other issues that these expatriates or immigrants deal with. Diasporic literature is exemplified with the perception of literature written on Diaspora or by Diaspora. The literary criteria of the diaspora, compresses the complexities and dynamic conditions of human migration: emigration and immigration. This paper explores the alienation or assimilation, the diasporic

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sensibility of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri in their selected novels, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Jasmine* and *The Namesake* respectively.

Keywords- Migration, Emigration, Immigration, Exile, Diaspora, Alienation, Isolation

In history, it has been observed that shifting from one's root to another climate and social values, has been a cult of a number of people in the colonial periods for the sake of their better understanding and status. There are several studies which focus attention to study the backgrounds and consequences based on such shiftings of human beings among which 'Diasporic Studies' is one of the most concerning points among the literary scholars. The study of diaspora relates to History, Literature, Art, Sociology, Population and Migration, Politics, Ethnic and Postcolonial and hence opens up with an exploration in the new and fresh area of research for the scholars to have their points of views on such a broad criteria of studies. Bharati Mukherjee (27 July, 1940 - 28 January, 2017) and Jhumpa Lahiri (11 July, 1967- till today) are the odyssey writers of feminine diaspora in the history of Indian English literature from the originated background of West Bengal (India) surviving in America and Italy respectively. Their literary contributions in the history of Indian diasporic sensibility are irresistible, indefatigable, innumerable, enormous and unstable which can't be bound in some literary words. There are many more Diasporic writers in the Indian background but these two writers have presented the plight of Indian feminine Diaspora at the par of the excellences. Most of these writers have different fields of experiences of expatriation as well as immigration. In connection with most of the Indian Diaspora writers, both of these female prominent literary artists have raised the basic problems of feminine diaspora through the sufferings of their portrayal of many diasporic characters in the context of immigration as well as emigration. Bharati Mukherjee considers herself as the immigrants rather than expatriates because expatriates have cultural retentiveness which ensures them a visible minority while immigrants have new ideas of adoption in the new social and cultural background of the diasporic world and so is looking Jhumpa Lahiri. In Lahiri's works, the characters are found adjusting themselves with the behaves and trends of the local people and locality and they try to enjoy their local culture in their gathering company of Bengali

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immigrants on the particular occasions while the characters of Bharati Mukherjee are looking very ambitious and arrogant that's why their adjustments have pride in themselves in their alien country rather they live on their owns resulting their ruins in anxieties and criminal activities. As a Diaspora writer, Jhumpa Lahiri deals with a multicultural society both from 'inside' and 'outside' seeking for her native identity as well as the personal identity in the adopted country. Her clear perspectives narrate us about her acculturation and her contra-acculturation, experienced by the second generation of Indian immigrants in America. Jhumpa Lahiri, not only shows the problems of the second generation diaspora but also narrates them, how these diaspora writers are embracing the socio-cultural values of the new country in their unsuccessful trends, feeling the sense of nostalgia at the same time for their own country and culture which creates the problematic situation of alienation or assimilation. The focus of Bharati Mukherjee's literary creations is upon the feminine struggle for their personal identity while in immigration they have to suffer a lot to adjust or assimilate with the local community of the foreignness. Most of the novels and short stories of Bharati Mukherjee deal with the problems of women sensibilities related to the issues of love, marriage or child-marriage, job opportunities, uprooted and resettled culture etc. In the presentation of trauma faced by the feminine immigrants, both of the novelists have many more similarities but they differ in their opinions of dislocation as well as assimilation or cultururation or acculturation or contra-cultururation like concepts of Indian diaspora in their works.

To comprehend diasporic sensibility of Mukherjee's literary works appropriately, it is imperative to understand that she is an expatriate in Canada and immigrant in America which is evolved through most of the immigrants pouring into the country from all over the world over a long period of time as she interprets, "I was [bicultural] when I wrote *The Tiger's Daughter*: now I am no longer so and America is more real to me than India...I realized that I was no longer expatriate but an immigrant that my life was more here...I need to belong. America matters to me. It is not that India failed me – rather America transformed me" (Patel, 72-73). The present confessional statement of Bharati Mukherjee makes her readers aware of her transformation into the American culture after a gap of sufferings in India or Canada. In the very beginning of her literary career as the novelist, Bharati Mukherjee wrote about her

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conflicted mentality of expatriates in Canada and the complicated sensibilities of America for the immigrants, felt in the foreign countries as she herself felt in these countries. Initially, she has been victimized of neglect in Canada where her writings were not assessed as powerful as her husband's. When she came to America she felt another barrier of immigration which made her not only conflicted but also vibrant and all of these are presented well in her literary works differently. Characterizing herself as Tara Banerjee in her autobiographical novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* as Mukherjee accepts it with Dave Weich in an interview: "Tara was also the name of the protagonist in my first novel, *The Tiger's Daughter*, and that character was very much me, too, so it's obviously a kind of alter ego that I wasn't totally aware of when I embarked on this" (powells.com). The diasporic theme of expatriation as well as isolation of Tara Banerjee in New York is well felt and expressed in this novel of Bharati Mukherjee where the novelist as well as the heroine is caught in between two worlds, cultures and homes. The novel is looking divided into four parts by Mukherjee and in each part the readers are introduced with the dangling personality of Tara into different phases of life. The first part of the novel seems to narrate the family background of Tara, and the process of her re-settlement in New York while the second part of it narrates her reactions on her re-visit to India (Calcutta from Bombay). The third part of the novel makes its readers aware of her life at Calcutta with her Catelli-Continental friends and Tara's visit to Darjeeling, her alienation and victimization in a mob coming back to Calcutta and her tragic mysterious end, all of these are well narrated in the last part of the novel. The very concept of life, 'imagination is better than reality' is found to be proved in the diasporic world of Bharati Mukherjee as well as of Jhumpa Lahiri. Foreign land is very attractive in the opinion of Tara's father but for Tara: "New York, ...had been exotic. Not because it had Laundromats and subways. But because ...girls like her, at least almost like her, were being knifed in elevators in their own apartment buildings" (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 33-34). But the personality who has felt the diasporic alienation and isolation, feels homesickness as Tara feels in the school at Poughkeepsie in New York "Three weeks in Poughkeepsie and I am undone... I must defend my family, my country,..." (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 11) and also when she did not find herself comfortable in her apartment "she had shaken out all her silken scarves, ironed them and hung them to make the apartment more Indian" (*The Tiger's Daughter*, 34) but when she

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comes back to Calcutta, she finds “Tragedy was not uncommon in Calcutta. The newspapers were full of epidemics, collusions, fatal quarrels and starvation, stretching before her was the vision of modern India” (*The Tiger’s Daughter*, 117). Love between the couple or lover and beloved in the eyes of an Indian father in the novel of Bharati Mukherjee is “nine-tenths prudence, one-tenth physical attraction” (*The Tiger’s Daughter*, 13) and for marriage in India “Caste, class and province are more valuable in marriage than giddiness” (*The Tiger’s Daughter*, 13). The above idea of Indianness hangs the diasporic youths like Tara on the branches of culture incidentally or accidentally in the works of Mukherjee which seems very pathetic.

Another novel of Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine* is described as an “adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through un-caulked windows” (*Jasmine*, 240). The heroine of the novel, Jasmine bearing many transformations as Jyoti, Jasmine, Jase, or Jane wants to “reposition the stars” (*Jasmine*, 240) of immigrants in the foreign landscapes against the Indian opinion of “helpless doomed” (*Jasmine*, 4) and “widowhood and exile” (*Jasmine*, 3) and the archaic mentality of Indianness suffering from, in her whole life, which subsumes the process of going beyond as narrow and constricting mould to be a complete or perfect individual or to arrive at self realization through opting the right choice and enlightenment, implying an altered awareness and sharpened perceptions. From the very beginning of the novel, Jasmine seems to be a “permissible rebellion” (*Jasmine*, 47) through her potency of power, winning all her battles and establishing a strong self-identity by her own efforts which are fraught with dangers, challenges and nearly insurmountable barriers. She wants “to be a doctor and set up my (her) own clinic in a big town” (*Jasmine*, 51). But her father thinks about her that “The girl is mad” (*Jasmine*, 51) because she does not want to get married on the willingness of her parents and other relatives because she thinks marriage as a “totally in control” (*Jasmine*, 44) which is looking an obstacle in the search of her freedom. Her father like the ancestry of Indian sensibility is of the views that “bright ladies are bearing bright sons, that is nature’s design” (*Jasmine*, 51) while she, like a change mentality of the migrants, wants “to break off the past” (*Jasmine*, 77) and her husband Prakash wants to make her “a new kind of city women” (*Jasmine*, 77) transforming her into the cultural lady of educated society. In this regard, Jasmine looks very close to her husband

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who is “doing better, making something more of his life than the fate intended.” (*Jasmine*, 85) that’s why she wants to migrate from India because she thinks “If we could just get away from India, then all fates would be cancelled” (*Jasmine*, 85). Like the other diasporans, she wants to make her husband aware of her new idea “We’d start with new fates, new stars. We could say or be anything we wanted. We’d be on the other side of the earth, out of God’s sight” (*Jasmine*, 85). Jasmine’s quest of learning, identity formation and structural order of the past as well as the present, sustains and enlarges her consciousness in addition to taking her out of “social order that had gone on untouched for thousands of years” (*Jasmine*, 229). But when she reaches America with the dream of fulfillment and faces Americanness, Jasmine thinks that she is “caught between the promise of America and old world of dutifulness,” (*Jasmine*, 240) and this contrast between America and the old world of dutifulness is a contrast between triumph and fulfillment on the one side while the other side narrates the annihilation of personality or self negotiation in the context of adjustment or assimilation. Going to the last phase of the novel, one can meet the immigrant sensibility of Jasmine’s dilemma whether she should be merged up with American locality of assimilation or she should be alienated from. Jasmine’s “mission” is a constructive exercise of her self-respect for her own which saves her from suicide and makes her able to search for her journey of self-discovery or self satisfaction for the personal identity in the world as a social critic observes, “Women’s social quest concerns women’s struggle to gain respect, equality and freedom in society In the social quest a woman begins in alienation from the human community and seeks new mode of relationship and action in society. . .” (Kumar, 186). Mukherjee’s Jasmine is an awakening of women society from the traditional bond of love and marriage to a well awakening, settlement and adjustment of their social criteria as well as their value for the growth of their society. Sumita Roy quotes from some social critic ideas in her paper, entitled ‘Jasmine : Exile as Spiritual Quest’ : “Women’s spiritual quest concerns a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul . . . provides orientation for women’s social quest and grounds it in something larger than individual or even collective achievements ... support(s) her when her own personal determination falters” (Kumar, 186). Further clarifying her views, Sumita Roy writes again: “In her attempt at charting a woman’s social and spiritual quest, Bharati Mukherjee has taken up each of these concerns and given them

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elaboration and concrete shape through the description of the experiences of her protagonist” (Kumar, 186). In this novel, the novelist used the broken pitcher again and again to explain the loss and rebirth of humanity in the shape of Jyoti or Jase whose “sense or sensibilities are actively engaged with the world outside her, leaving no time to reflect on the problems...why one should think of East, West, North or South when one can be a singular self as culture and history would shape one” (Kumar, 176). Jyoti is the portrayal of Mukherjee in a desired but alien environment, which “does not probe the inner conscious of the protagonist nor does she depict the deeper struggle the Americans undergo in relating to each other” (Kumar, 176). In the words of Kumar, “Jasmine’s every moment is a calculated step into her Americanization and with each development a vital change is marked in her personality” (Kumar, 118). No doubt, Jasmine tries to change her views of migration but it was a society where even a beggar could abuse her abruptly calling her as a “Foreign bitch” (*Jasmine*, 139). So, she is unable to be mixed up with, erasing her personal Indian identity in the assimilation of Americanization and always walks with Indian sensibility of womanhood which checks her for the total personality of assimilation. Edward Said like critics want to persuade these migrants and locality but he is compelled to think that “Exile is a jealous state” (Said, 178) after perceiving the real situation of the migrants because people have lack of patience and cooperation regarding the living standard of the migrants into the adopted country or culture. The attractive aspects of being in exile emerges an “exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you” (Said, 178). When this jealousy encounters such a crucial problems which demands the revenge over, it is born in the form of terror and people have to face terrorists like Sukkhi in *Jasmine* and Abbas Sattar Hai in *The Desirable Daughters* of Bharati Mukherjee.

Jhumpa Lahiri, on the other side, writes about the diasporic sensibility of resettlement without roots. Lahiri’s debut novel, *The Namesake*, describes the story of a Bengali couple who leaves their native country and culture and settled in the United States of America for the sake of their better growth. Spanning over a period of thirty two years, the novel explores the diasporic experiences of two generations of Indians who have not only gained remarkably the material values of life but also they have lost many related things which can’t be regained in

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their lives. The novel makes various sojourns from India to America and vice versa to unfold the various happenings as well as mishappenings that construct, deconstruct and reconstruct numerous cultural beliefs, human beings often carry as the part of their traditional, social or individual needs and expectations. Nearly most of the Indian characters of the novel like Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol and Sonia, come into contact with many other characters as well as incidents which promise them for new scope of knowledge as well as opportunities for their individual or social growth, creating in them global outlook but finally, they find only despair and disappointment in fulfilling their dreams for their locality or nativity as well as their societal identification. In the last phrase of the novel, Lahiri proves the dictum, 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'. The novel convincingly unfolds the story of the Gangulis that echoes feeling of alienation and displacement, identity crisis in the first and second generation immigrants, family relationship in diasporic dilemma, and nostalgia, and cultural assimilation, intergenerational gap, as all these aspects prominently forming Indian sensibility of Bengali Diaspora in the United States of America. The protagonist of the novel, Ashoke Ganguli with his newly married wife comes to America for the betterment of education where the ladies "...in spite of their miniskirts and bikinis, in spite of their hand-holding on the street and lying on top of each other on the Cambridge Common, prefer their privacy" (*The Namesake*, 03). Ashima's first introduction of calling name of her husband in America is "not the type of thing Bengali wives do" (*The Namesake*, 02) detaches herself from Americanization. Ashima's pregnancy is "a sort of lifelong pregnancy – a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of a sorts... is something more complicated and demanding" (*The Namesake*, 49-50) in the United States of America. Further, she is terrified to raise "a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (*The Namesake*, 06). Their child is named as Gogol Ganguly, the mixture of two culture. Ashima doesn't want raise "Gogol alone in this country" (*The Namesake*, 33). She wants to go back to India, but what they will reply if the Indian locality asks them for the fascination of America and this sensibility checks them from their decision. Going to the last phase of novel, especially after the death of Ashoke, Gogol has only option to take care of his family in India, sacrificing his love for American beloveds which is the cause detachment and distraction for the diasporic youths like Gogol. When

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Ashima is in America she wants to go to India but when she is asked for selling her well constructed and decorated building in America, she is unable to decide, what she should do. The concluding part of the novel reminds us the statement of Salman Rushdie: “our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India’s of the mind” (Rushdie, 76).

To conclude after reading and examining the diasporic sensibilities of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri, one can say that initially, Indian Diaspora tries to live in alienation but the suffocation of alienation compels them to assimilate with the new social and cultural background of the Third World but when they try to merge themselves completely, they remain unsuccessful in conversion because their root culture and identity prevent them to be mixed up with. If one can study abroad the problems of Diaspora one can conclude one’s opinion that it is not only the problem of Indian diaspora alone but it is the condition of all the diasporas, surviving in all over the world. Vijay Mishra very aptly remarks, “All Diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way” (Mishra, 1). Diasporic people are precariously lodged within an episteme of real or imagined displacements. They have self-imposed sense of exile and they are haunted by specters, arising from the conditional situation of the locality in their regards within the irredentist or separatist movements of human beings. No doubt, the migration of human beings made the world a global village where migration is the common phenomenon that leads to cross-cultural conflicts and multicultural identity of human beings, but all the migrants are found unsatisfied in their views and virtues. Initially, the migration was taken for vocational problem but now it is taken for avocation purpose without understanding the reality of predicaments they have to face in the new world of adaptation. In this regard of discussion one can conclude our ideas of migration or exile in the words of Peter Townsend, “An extraordinary variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety states, anomie, despair, depersonalization, rootlessness, apathy, social disorganization, powerless, meaningless, isolation, pessimism and loss of belief or value” (Peter, 325). So the diasporic sensibility of Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri seems to be suffered with the dual sensibility of Alienation or assimilation of Indian Diaspora.

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