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DIASPORIC DILEMMA OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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Abstract

The term Diaspora is obtained from a Greek word, meaning dispersion. It was used by the Jewish people, referring to their worldwide scattering outside their homeland, the Land of Israel. The Diaspora Indian writing in English includes all parts of the world. Writers like it. K. Ramanujan, Bharati Mukherjee, M.G. Vassanji, Meena Alexander, Rohinton Mistry,Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, to mention a few, differ from each other not only in their socio- cultural backgrounds but also in their thematic concerns and narrative techniques. Bharati Mukherjee, an acknowledged voice of expatriate immigrants and an Indian born American novelist, is a versatile writer. Her creative Oeuvre comprises five novels: *The Tiger's Daughter (1972), Wife (1975), Jasmine (1984), The Holder of the World (1993)* and *Leave it to Me (1997).* She has published two collections of Short Stories *Darkness (1945)* and *The Middleman and Other Stories.* Her novels depict the problems encountered by Indians and other third world immigrants who try to adjust to the North American lifestyle. Her works project the diasporic dilemma of Americanized Tara Cartright, struggles of Westernized young Dimple and the frightening lives and several roles of Jasmine. Her heroines explore the differences of culture between the origin land and host land. They are concerned with the split of identities in an individual. The detached attitude of the host culture causes rootlessness and they feel alienated. They fail to connect themselves to the old place and also to belong to the new place. They live in two worlds and so they become culturally displaced. They lead a double life that results in a dilemma in the minds of her heroines.

Keywords: Diaspora – immigrants – Split Identity – Culturally displaced – double life

During the British period in our country, several Indians moved to England and other developed countries. After freedom, Indians migrated to various nations for higher education and betterment of life. Every migrant serves as a transporter of cultural baggage and transfers it in a new cultural atmosphere. In the new place he classifies his experience and alters himself in an alien land. In the host land the groups of migrants are taken as a part of cultural pluralism and multiculturalism.

The term Diaspora is obtained from a Greek word, meaning dispersion. It was used by the Jewish people, referring to their worldwide scattering outside their homeland, the Land of Israel. Jews endured due to migration and adaptation to the new nations and accepting their faith and tradition.The model of Jewish Diaspora was followed by the Armenian, Chinese, African and Indian Communities. The Indian Diaspora developed gradually during the 19th and 20th century. The migration of contract labourers, traders, professionals and students took place to the British, French, Dutch, Dane and Portuguese Colonies in Asia, Africa, Caribbean and far Eastern countries.

The writers of Indian Diaspora in their writings discuss different ethnic experiences, languages and religious traditions. They portray the migrants' homesickness, longing, and their quest for identity. The Diaspora Indian writing inEnglish includes all parts of the world. Writers like A.K. Ramanujan,

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Bharati Mukherjee, M.G. Vasanji, Meena Alexander, Rohint on Mistry, Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, to mention a few, differ from each other not only in their socio-cultural backgrounds but also in their thematic concerns and narrative techniques.

Bharati Mukherjee, an acknowledged voice of expatriate immigrants and an Indian-born American novelist, is a versatile writer. Born in 1940 in a Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta but married to a fellow Canadian student Clark Blaise at the University of Iowa in 1963. She lived in Canada from 1966 to 1980. She got Canadian citizenship and lived in Toronto and Montreal. She migrated to the USA in 1980 with her family and became a citizen of the USA. The shift to America brought great changes in her personality and gave a new power to her literacy aspiration. She acknowledges, "For me it is a movement away from the aloofness of expatriation to exuberance of imagination."(Padma 161). Her creative oeuvre comprises five novels: *The Tiger's Daughter (1972*), *Wife (1975), Jasmine (1989), The Holder of the World (1993)* and *Leave it to Me (1997).* She has published two collections of Short Stories *Darkness(1945*) and *TheMiddleman* and *Other Stories.* Mukherjee has arisen as an eminent Indian English Fiction Writer in the last decade. All her writings focus on the American dream dominantly. But when she shifted to America, she discussed many themes such as nostalgia, frustration and hope. Her novels depict the problems encountered by Indians and other third world immigrants who try to adjust to the North American lifestyle. Her works project the diasporic dilemmas of Americanized Tara Cartright, struggles of Westernized young Dimple and the frightening lives and several roles of Jasmine. Her heroines explore the differences of culture between the origin land and host land. They are concerned with the split of identities in an individual. The detached attitude of the host culture causes rootlessness and they feel alienated. They fail to connect themselves to the old place and also to belong to the new place. They live in two worlds and so they become culturally displaced. They lead a double life that results in a dilemma in the minds of her heroines. This article discusses the dilemma of women in Bharati Mukherjee's novels *Wife* and *Jasmine.*

Bharati Mukherjee is an imaginative archivist of the twentieth century immigrant experiences in America. She has expressed the conflicts of the Indian Women in America clearly. The longing for their home and their struggling to accommodate the host culture, generate a dilemma in the minds of the third world people who live in the West. They feel assimilating to a new culture is not as easy as changing citizenship. As they change their citizenship, they are reborn. Mukherjee pinpoints the struggles of American immigrants when they try to establish new identities.

Wife is Mukherjee's second novel. Mukherjee introduces a fragile Bengali woman Dimple who migrates to New York with her engineer husband in search of a better life. But she is utterly disturbed by the unsteady cultural roles. She is disturbed mentally and kills her husband. *Wife* discusses Dimple's cultural disorientation, alienation and mental deterioration. In her attempts to live, she is totally disintegrated. Dimple's story represents the pathetic position of Indian Women in America. Dimple likes the match organized by her father and then she is expected to perform the role of being an obedient wife. In America she finds her husband Amit Basu, a hurdle to frame her new identity .There is a steady clash in her heart and she seesaws between India that stands for tradition and America that symbolizes freedom. The hard realities of her married life falis to

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reconcile her love, freedom and self realisation . Amit can not understand her expectations due to his busy schedule in business. He names her change as cultural shock. Thus Dimple is displaced both from her husband and from her home culture. She develops a fragmentation in her character slowly which leads to insomnia. In the final scene of the novel, she kills her husband with a kitchen knife. This is an eventual gesture of fragmentation and hopelessness. Being an immigrant woman, she feels alien, powerless and helpless and becomes a sufferer of culture clash.

Amit is a typical Indian husband whose male ego and pride are more important than his wife's needs and wants. He is not ready to allow her to go out and work. He likes her to be American but not too American. Hence she gets confused about her identity. When she is seduced by Milt, her psychological struggle becomes sharper. She reports "She was so much worse off than ever more lonely, more cut off from Amit, from Indians, left only with borrowed disguises...living like a shadow without feelings"(W 200) She is highly depressed of her life that when an ashtray breaks, she remarks, "It was best to regard the broken ashtray as the end of an era in her own life".(W 148) Dimple always lives in constant fear in America. Everything frightens her. She hears only about murder rape and smuggling. She gets emotional struggling in facing American culture.

Once Dimple went to Indian-American Vinod Khana's place. There she met many Indians after she had left Calcutta. She felt that little India had come alive. Everyone present there admired Indian tradition, culture, habit, food etc. They cursed Americans and the American way of living. They consider Americans as dirty people. In course of time, Amit loses his employment. This leads to several contradictions in the life of Dimple and Amit. She feels that Amit is not the man whom she wanted as her husband. She comes to a conclusion that her marriage is a failure. Furthermore, she is suffering from an inferiority complex. Amit blames her for her ignorance often. He believes that providing comfort is enough and he seldom bothers about her emotional needs. He never allows her to go out but says," You must go out, make friends, do something constructive not stay at home and think about Calcutta." (W 111) Her world shrinks into the four walls of her house and media becomes her only companion. As an Indian expatriate, she wants to preserve her Indian identity. Thus she is caught in a dilemma between American culture and Indian culture. She wants to be assertive as an American woman and at the same wants to be submissive like an Indian wife. She is unable to balance herself between the two worlds.

Jasmine, the third novel of Bharathi Mukherjee is a tale of transformation with disintegration and regeneration. The protagonist of the novel is Jothi. She was born at Hasnapur in Punjab. She was born, " eighteen years after the partition riots"(J 44). She married Prakash, an ambitious youth. He gives her the name Jasmine with the hope of making her modern. But he is killed by the terrorists and she is left alone. She is humiliated as a widow by her people. She regains her power and takes a strong conviction to fulfill the dream of her husband to go to America. She gets the forged document with the help of his brother. Her journey to America begins on a vibrating note. She is brutally raped by the captain of the ship. This violent act transforms Jothi to become Jasmine. She takes revenge on the captain by killing him. This first experience on American soil transformed her into a new person.She considers that she has taken a new birth after killing the captain. Initially she decides to burn herself alive in the place where her husband wanted to study. But now she is

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determined to live.Gordon, a kind American woman, trains her to walk and talk like an American. She cuts her hair, wears American clothes, learns English and starts earning money by working in call centres. Besides her appearance, her name is also changed as Jazzy by Gordon. From Florida she moved to New York to teach Punjabi to Indian students. Then she becomes a caretaker to Taylor's family. She accepted Taylor's love when his wife divorced him.

Jase opts for fluidity rather than stagnation. She always loves free will. When she understands, the killer of her husband is on the way to catch her, she moves to Iowa. There she meets Bud Ripplemayor, a conservative banker. He falls in love with her and give her a new name Jane. She becomes a stepmother of Du, her adopted Vietnamese son. Her life with Bud comes to an end with the appearance of Taylor. She tumbles into the hands of Taylor and goes to California with Taylor. Jasmine has several names Jothi, Jasmine, Jase and Jane corresponding to the will and wish of her male counterparts.

The two protagonists, Dimple and Jasmine kill their past selves and find out new selves that provide power to them to actively advance into unknown but promising futures. Dimple in the novel is childish and impractical. Her dreams take her to travel down the wrong road. She loses her mental equilibrium and gets attracted to the colourful life of America which results in the cold blooded murder of Amit. Jasmine, unlike Dimple, rises above the level of being a daughter or wife. Her identity changes at each stage but she manages all and takes on a new identity at each stage. She skillfully survives adjusting to all hardships. Thus Mukherjee has presented a true picture of the dilemma faced by her women characters in an unknown land.

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