

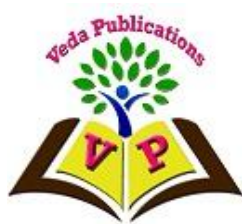
THE REMNANTS OF THE PAST IN THE WRITINGS OF

BHARATI MUKHERJEE

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ABSTRACT



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This study investigates Bharati Mukherjee's rejection of the past in the migrant's process of adaptation in the host land in the introduction to *Darkness* (1985). Mukherjee emphasizes that discarding the interventions of the mother land/ the past is necessary for a total inclusion in the new land and avoiding the feeling that she will never belong, anywhere (Mukherjee, 1985:2). Her refusal of the past, however, arouses criticisms mostly from Indian critics who have appointed themselves guardians of the purity of ethnic cultures (Mukherjee, 1997:4) and accuse her of race treachery (*ibid*). This paper shows that even though Mukherjee voices the rejection of the past, the past or Indianness is a significant presence in her writings. It is more than a metaphor. The past, in fact, for the most part defines her characteristics as a (migrant) writer and her writings, including two of them which have been the core analysis of this study, *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989).

Keywords: *Past, Diaspora, Indian Woman, Cross Cultural Conflicts.*

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For a diasporic writer like Mukherjee, writings are important in the way they represent multiple sentiments toward the mother land and host land in this case, India, Canada, and the USA. *Wife* and *Jasmine* particularly depict Mukherjee's moving from her discriminated life as an expatriate in Canada to celebrating her citizenship in US. The writings most importantly also underscore the psychic experiences of migration of Dimple Das Gupta and Jyoti Vindh, the female characters. Dimple and Jyoti are the representatives of figures in motion, living within borders, ambiguity and in-stability

with moving identities as the result of migration and the process of interrelated duality of past, present, motherland, host land, and here and there.

This study demonstrates that the remnants of the past are indeed significant to define the migrant positions of Mukherjee's female characters, Dimple Das Gupta and Jyoti Vindh in *Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989). The mingling of the past in migrant present's time has importantly influenced the way a woman positions and adapts herself to the host land. The context of female migration is not simply about crossing the borders and being a dispersed people, but it involves a process of

uprooting self from the original land and re-rooting self in the new land. This process of uprooting and re-rooting is different in the case of women, particularly in the first generation of Indian migrant women like Dimple and Jyoti. While Keya Ganguly's research has especially shown the different orientation of Indian migrant men and women toward the idea of the past, the cases of Dimple and Jyoti provide further considerable examples of the intervention of the past into the present migrant time in literary works.

Tradition, together with the past, has also played an important role in defining the positions of Dimple and Jyoti as Indian women not only in the mother land but also in the host land. Dimple and Jyoti are, however, twice as complicated by the patriarchal tradition which is carried over to the host land and the obligation to adapt to the host land. In the host land, the duties as tradition preservers keep following them. The duties inevitably urge them to keep connecting themselves with the (patriarchal) past. In this case, the past ambiguously weakens the positions of Dimple and Jyoti in diasporic context and in some ways also stimulates them to break the restriction of tradition. In Dimple's case, her main aim of migrating to US is to accompany Amit, her husband. She does not have any particular reason of her own to migrate, becoming someone who readily serves her husband and preserves the Indian atmosphere in diasporic household. This being merely a partner especially intensifies the patriarchal penetration of tradition into the household. An Indian wife like Dimple has to stay an Indian and cannot draw other values from Indian tradition. To Dimple, this definitely complicates her process of adaptation in the host land as Amit's patriarchal rules add more difficulties for Dimple.

As an Indian woman, Dimple is not the kind of woman who easily expunges her past. She still retains her sari although ambiguously she wants to wear jeans and sweater like an American woman does. She keeps celebrating Durga Pujah and Saraswati Pujah, the Hindu holidays and gathering with her Indian friends. Through these activities, Dimple compensates for feeling homesick toward India, her motherland. Moreover, she

keeps doing other small things to assert her Indian identity like drinking and serving her guests imported Darjeeling tea from India.

Although to respect her guest she eats red meat behind her guest's back, she throws it out as she realizes that she has disobeyed Hindu prohibition. Reiterating the past in diasporic context has provided Dimple with comfort and strength as the past represents the familiarity as opposed to the new land that exposes her to alienation. Although the patriarchal past has oppressed Dimple, it surprisingly has also aroused Dimple to fight back against the values of restrictive tradition which are carried over to the diasporic household. Murdering Amit – even though the murder itself cannot be justified – is Dimple's rebellion toward the patriarchal values of the mother land.

In the case of Jyoti Vindh, the past is eloquently integrated into her present circumstances. Past and present are entangled and build a state of double consciousness. Jyoti's diasporic life is the amalgamation of her being an Indian woman and an integrated migrant woman. Unlike Dimple who keeps herself in a migrant ghetto, Jyoti plunges herself totally into American society. Taking on several names significantly marks her transformations. Her aim of migration seems to be ambiguous since she wants to perpetuate sati tradition but also breaks of by leaving her village and crossing the ocean. The past continues to define her identity as an Indian woman as she borrows the strength of Kali, an Indian goddess to escape the threat of the present, as embodied in Half Face.

Like Dimple, Jasmine moves to several places. She lives in the Indian ghetto in Flushing, as an inauspicious, docile and marginal widow. Moving to Manhattan, however, marks Jasmine's liberation and entry into American society. As a caregiver in Manhattan, Jasmine is still subject to patriarchal power but her diasporic space also allows her to use her potential as a Punjabi in Columbia University. Despite her ambition to break from the past, Jasmine still makes full use of her Indianness and in some ways injects it into her surroundings. The negative past in the form of Sikh terror haunts Jasmine in

Manhattan and causes her to move to Baden, Iowa. Jase metamorphoses into Jane Ripplemeyer, an American banker's wife, but her Indianness keeps following her steps. Jane, in fact, acts more as an Indian wife than an American wife to her American husband. Because she feels that she is not accepted in the neighbourhood, she mingles with other Asians like Kwang, Liu, and Patel. This is both a confirmation of her origins and a new American multiculturalism of the present. For Jane, the acceptance and recognition of her Indianness, her past, part of her identity is important to construct her position within American society.

The denials of the past, the bleak memories of the mother land in fact have brought Dimple and Jyoti to the re-marriage of past and present and the recalling of artefacts of the mother land to the host land that initially seem to oppress. Within Hindu tradition, the hybridities of Dimple and Jyoti are then embedded through the ambiguous unification of the benevolent Sita and the malevolent Kali, Hindu goddesses. As Sita, they are destined to be exiles, adrift through multiple ambivalences and to be the nurturing wives to their husbands in the new world. As Kali, they are full of initiative to ambiguously break the patriarchal values of both worlds. The ambiguous characteristics of Dimple and Jyoti indeed conform to the framework of diaspora discussed in this study. Being diasporic women, Dimple and Jyoti risk being fragmented, ruptured and splintered figures. Paradoxically, it is their hybridity, ambivalence and un-fixity that offer a prospect for resolving such a negative condition. The past and the present are always interrelated and not separated. The new aspects of Dimple and Jyoti come from somewhere have histories that cannot be easily erased and that the existence of the past will secure their sense of Indian immigrant experience. The contemporary time is the most suitable time for the full fledged development of the marginalized sections of the society such as woman and the scheduled class. Woman has been at the bottom of social hierarchy in Indian patriarchal set up for a long time; She has been considered as a powerless and weak creature. But, now the changing

scenario has changed her roles and the emerging class of New Woman has questioned her traditional roles and aspires to go beyond the forbidden territory. The present paper analyses the challenges and future prospects for the New Woman Tara in Bharati Mukherjee's *Desirable Daughters*.

Bharati Mukherjee is a Third World Feminist writer whose preoccupation is to deal with the problems and issues related with the South Asian Women particularly India. Like her contemporary feminist writers she upholds the cause of women, but she differs from them because her basic concern is to delineate the problems of cross cultural conflicts faced by Indian immigrants particularly women. Her female characters suffer from double colonization once by patriarchy and second by expatriation. Being herself an immigrant woman she has been preoccupied with women and their problems of adjustment in America and Canada.

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