

Diasporic Interface of Colliding Minds and Cultures: Psychological and Emotive Dimensions of *Two Ways to Belong in America*

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Abstract

Bharati Mukherjee demonstrates the complexity of the effects of immigration by underlining the universally acknowledged importance of the nation of immigration, America. The country and the immigrant establish a bond that enables the former to develop as a result of the latter's migration, rather than just upsetting or altering it. The transformation is brought about through interaction with the outside world, and consequently energizing and revitalizing the host nation. The immigrant, as a recent arrival from a foreign culture, clashes with American culture and pinpoints the flaws underlying its past and present giving rise to the cultural interface. He traverses the borders of the new terrain and tries to assimilate in the foreign soil lending his own cultural aroma to it. According to her, cultural exchange between natives and immigrants in a country fosters a fusion and growth for both the groups. Unlike other migration authors who go nuts over the loss and degradation of the home culture, Bharati Mukherjee ardently defends the advantages of shifting to a new region or greener pasture. She urges the immigrants to break free from the bonds of cultural conflict and alienation and to embrace and establish their new identity as citizens of the United States. For her, it really simply boils down to attitude and propensity. Everyone may flourish and realise their aspirations in America, a nation of chances. *Two Ways to Belong in America*, which appeared in *The New York Times* in 1996 is a tale of two sisters, Meera and Bharati, who move to America largely for their education. Bharati Mukherjee addresses the topic of multiple identities in the immigrant community throughout the narrative. This story explores the personal changes that being in America has made on the author as she embraced it as her new home, as well as Meera's determined resistance to those changes, who wishes to take advantage of the benefits that living in America has to offer while remaining steadfast to her country of origin. As it addresses the two distinct ways in which the immigrants in America establish their sense of identity, the story's title is self-explanatory.

Keywords: Expatriate, Immigrant, Identity, Diaspora, Culture, Interface, Transformation, Divergent, Perspectives, Miscellaneous.

Bharati Mukherjee identifies herself as an Indian-American author, discarding the expatriate identity, who writes on diasporic and immigrant experiences. After her horrifying experience of expatriation in Canada, she enjoyed the richness of immigration America provided. Bharati believes that in the era of diaspora, one's biological identity could not be their true identity because immigration causes both physical and psychological changes. Her writings discuss the conflict between instinct and logic, reliant

security and independence, and social and psychedelic identity. She puts more faith in the present than in the past as it is her present which will shape up her future eventually. She, through her works, wants to prove that we are all individuals despite coming from different ethnic backgrounds. She focuses on how human nature operates. She came to understand that because it affected both the person and the national identity, her metamorphosis was a two-way process. The fact that her women are not viewed as passive bystanders to the drama of history or as victims of oppression but rather as being an agency and writing a history of their own, makes them a solid foundation for research on the transformation of neo-colonial Indian women from feminine to female. Bharati argues passionately about the benefits of moving to a new location, in contrast to other migration authors who go gaga over the loss and deterioration of the native culture. She exhorts the immigrants to break the shackles of cultural collision and feeling alienated, and embrace and assert their new identity as belonging to America. For her, it just comes down to attitude and inclination, really. America is a land of opportunities where everyone may prosper and make their dreams come true. According to Bharati, America represents self-transformation which she illustrates through her women characters; Whereas Jasmine is brave and energetic, Dimple in *Wife* is shy and meek.

The feminist movement was at its height in the west when Bharati started writing. Naturally, the author could not escape its effect, all the more so because as a woman she was trying to make a living abroad. Her female characters, however, show a delicate balance between Indian traditionalism and the idea of western freedom; as a result, these characters are not overtly pushy in demanding freedom as a right of birth. Instead, they are obedient and docile, at the same time showing strength and willingness to face life's challenges head-on for survival while refusing to budge from tradition.

The United States was pushed by radical social upheaval in the 20th century to recognise its changing links with other countries and reinvent its culture to meet its expanding interaction with people from across the world. Technology advancements in transportation and communication linked America to the rest of the world, extending American culture there while simultaneously bringing the rest of the world into America. Wars raged all over the world, and journalism and television media spread the pictures of the World Wars to the general public. The imperial assets of European nations were given up or lost. At the turn of the century, an inflow of predominantly white Europeans drove this boom, whereas, when the national origins restrictions of earlier U.S. immigration rules were repealed in 1965, a fresh wave of generally non-white immigrants arrived, and immigration surged once more. People crossed borders and continents in search of a better life and enter the First World. Bharati Mukherjee and her sister Meera, also the two characters of 'Two Ways to Belong in America' crossed the seven seas and reached the land of their dreams, America during one such time, that is early 1960s.

However, Bharati Mukherjee is of the opinion that the impact of immigration is multifaceted and she does so by highlighting the anonymously accepted significance of the country migrated to. A relationship forms between the immigrant and the country, allowing the latter to evolve as a result of this immigration, rather than merely disrupting or changing it. Confrontation with the outside world leads to transformation, which is followed by revivification of the country. The prominent immigrant, as a newcomer from a different culture, conflicts with American society and draws attention to contradictions in both its present and its history. For her, migration to a country is a two-way process where natives and

immigrants form a fusion and grow in the mutual interchange of cultures. The act of migrating, as noted by Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt, accentuates the sense of identification; in other words, although marked identification and the questions that go along with it may not be unusual for women in their own countries, it becomes an elusive concept after immigration and is inevitably questioned, now not by natives but by white Americans in the new setting. (34)

‘Two Ways to Belong in America’, published in *TheNew York Times* in the year 1996 is a story about two sisters, Meera and Bharati, who migrate to America primarily for their education. Through the story, the idea of many identities in the immigrant community is reflected upon by Bharti Mukherjee. This story describes the changes that living in America has brought about in the author personally and willful resistance thereonto the same changes by her sister, Meera who wants to milk the opportunities offered by America but stay loyal to the roots of her land of birth. Bharati finds it weird. The story's title says it all as it discusses the two diverse ways in which the immigrants in America define their sense of identity exemplified by Meera and Bharati. One is reminiscent about her native land while living abroad and lives as an expatriate, and the other accepts the new place as an immigrant and creates roots from within to become one with her adopted land. The two sisters represent these two diasporic identities on the new territory, America.

In the early 1960s, Bharati and her sister travelled to America to pursue their studies. After completing their studies in the US, they both decided to go back to India for their marriages with grooms of their parent's choices.

Contrary to their original plan, both the sisters stayed back and married men of their liking. Meera married an Indian immigrant student and secured the labour certificate which is a prerequisite for the green card to reside comfortably and legally in America. She continued to live happily with her Indian citizenship intact with a firm hope that she would return to her roots, her native land on her superannuation. She exclaims, “... I was totally happy. Having my green card meant I could visit any place in the world I wanted to and then come back to a job that's satisfying and that I do very well”. The status of expatriate Indian was chosen over the immigrant American. On the contrary, Bharati wedded outside her culture, a Canadian-American citizen. Marrying in an alien culture is no cake walk, Bharati knew and was well prepared for the consequences. She welcomed the mental agony caused by not marrying in her own culture as her father would have expected and process of self-transformation to adopt the new habits in the settled soil. She rather took it as an opportunity for self-expansion and self-experimentation. She readily switched to “blue jeans and T – shirts” from the ethnic sarees and parted ways with her observance of 3,000-year-old caste system unapologetically. She makes a confession, “My books have often been read as unapologetic (and in some quarters overenthusiastic) texts for cultural and psychological “mongrelization.” It is word I celebrate.” They stayed close to each other through telephonic conversation and still exchanged their opinion on various issues. They both maintained the decorum of being well bred individuals and always stayed polite despite having divergent perspectives. They never spoke their minds while simultaneously pitied each other. Meera felt sorry for Bharati for her unstructured life, lack of Indianness and her monotonous routine, whereas Bharati had pity on her for her narrow perspective on American citizenship and not mixing up with the “superficial”

American culture. As a result, there is a cultural clash, which can be seen overtly between the two sisters and the writer affirms of having a sort of unsaid enmity between the two.

The real drama comes into play when American Government, unannounced, introduces certain changes in midstream in the immigration rules, given to unprecedented surge in the immigration statistics and President Gore's "Citizenship USA" drive. Meera who has invested more than 30 years of her "creativity and professional" in the foreign country feels used, "manipulated and discarded". She argues that any such transformation in the immigration rules as curtailing benefits of legal immigrants, should be applied prospectively. Now what Meera advocates is not just the case with immigrant South Asians, but the whole immigrant class who had stayed rooted so for all those productive and professionally best years of their lives they had spent in America. Meera desires to stayover in America but on her own terms and conditions, not to be dictated by everchanging moods of American Government. In her anger, she blurts out, "If America wants to play the manipulative game, I'll play too.' She snapped. 'I'll become a U.S. citizen for now, then change back to Indian when I'm ready to go home. I feel some kind of irrational attachment to India that I don't to America.'" Meera resists the change of culture on acquiring the American citizenship and plans to quit her American status after her retirement. She stubbornly clings to her Indian roots. Nothing in this entire world can be enchanting enough for her to make her to give away her Indianness. Bharati can relate well with what Meera is going through after the anti-immigration bills in Congress. She painfully reminisces, "I felt the same sense of betrayal that Meera feels now. I will never forget the pain of that sudden turning, and the casual resist outbursts the Green Paper elicited." The official turning of Canadian government against its immigrants, especially the South Asians, drove Bharati out of Canada and made her settle down in America.

The colliding interface which has in play the minds and cultures represented by the two sisters displays a psychological and emotive arena. It provides a peep into the psyche and emotive divergence of the two sisters. Meera was burning to backfire as she felt cheated and was still adamant to hold onto her original roots, Bharati, on the contrary, joyfully embraces the alien culture of America and immersed herself into it entirely. She feels one with her new surroundings and is basking in the glory of her new transformed self-identity. She is delighted to admit, "America spoke to me – I married it – I embraced the demotion from expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of 'pure culture', the saris, the delightfully accented English."

Maya Manju Sharma views Mukherjee's transformation from an expatriate to an immigrant as the internalisation of a worldview and the creation of an "inner world".

The point which seems to be the highlight of the story is how two sisters related by blood and almost identical in their upbringing, their appearance, and their perspective on life and their future plans, react in two different ways to their experiences in diaspora. The writer states, "In one family, from two sisters alike as peas in a pod, there could not be a wider divergence of immigrant experience". One readily conforms to the new society and culture, and gives upon her 'expatriate aristocrat' status to obtain the 'rightfully American' status while another refutes it all. The answer is provided by the author herself, "Meera and I differ, however, in the ways in which we hope to interact with the country that we have chosen to live in." By adapting to the Americanization Bharati has relinquished her old Indian ways of draping saris, believing in arranged marriages, cast-ridden society and her Convent school-accented

English, while Meera, on the other hand has kept it all. Though once they were alike, now they are world apart. The writer ends the story by sketching the difference between herself and her sister Meera.

The current paper shall also draw the attention towards the warmth and the proximity these sisters shared before flying off to America. They both were identical in almost everything and held nearly identical opinions about social, political, and cultural issues in India, “When we left India, we were almost identical in appearance and attitude. We dressed alike, in saris; we expressed identical views on politics, on social issues”. They had so much in common. They harboured same beliefs and values and shared a strong bond enriched by the emotional investment they made when they were in India. Their lives and their bonding underwent a drastic change as soon as they chartered the oceans. They were no more alike in anything. The overseas living played havoc on their sisterly love. Though both the sisters differed in their viewpoint on immigration, both were equally deceived and betrayed by foreign soil they trusted with life, Bharati in Canada and Meera in America. Meera answered the U.S. government in their own language by obtaining the U.S. citizenship only to forego later when the time to return India arrives. Bharati having had the same experience in Canada, obtaining U.S. citizenship is the first thing she aims for upon her arrival in the country. America is a melting pot of miscellaneous cultures where they both have to compromise their identities when it comes to survival in diaspora. Even after the stringent changes in the immigration bills, Meera, despite her detachment with America and her desperate adherence to Indian roots, strategically readies to procure the U.S. citizenship instead of sailing off to her native land, her real identity.

In the sisterly relationship on the foreign soil, language appears to be both a unifying and an emotive subject. There is an understanding that languages may flourish within their own cultural contexts but lose their vitality when moved to a different environment. It is interesting to note that Bharati fondly remembers how both the sisters, Meera and Bharati, spoke in the same “Calcutta convent-school accent” when they lived happily back then in their own home country. She thinks of it again when she dwells upon the divergent take both the sisters have on their immigrant experiences and she chuckles remembering about their “delightfully accented English”. The convent school- accented English seems to work as a unifying factor for the two otherwise distant siblings in the foreign land, taking them thus back to their native roots.

Bharti Mukherjee has effectively combined her diverse experiences, history, and life into a new genre of writing known as new immigrant fiction, with the major focus of her works being a portrayal of the plight of Asian immigrants in North America. As a result, it is evident that Mukherjee's themes mostly centre on the phenomena of migration, the status of recent immigrants, their sense of alienation as expatriates, and the Indian woman sojourning abroad and her quest for identity. She made a clear statement in an interview with *The Massachusetts Review* as she said:

“The immigrants in my stories go through extreme transformation in America and at the same time they alter the country’s appearance and psychological make up.”

It is hard to avoid the personal components that are so overtly and vividly depicted in Mukherjee's work. She struggled with identification as an exile from India, then as an expatriate in Canada, and lastly as an immigrant in the United States, and she felt compelled to write about it. Mukherjee struggled with self-

limitation; as a result, she transcended boundaries and considered herself a pioneer of new realms, experiences, and literary works. Mukherjee focuses on the idea of the individual within a broad society as she tells her stories from a wide range of points of view. Giving voice to her new found identity, she declares with the following parlance cogently, “I need to put roots down, to vote and make the difference that I can. The price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation.”

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