CHAPTER - 1

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The moments of immigrants have crossed borders with the advent of globalization and the question of identity is gaining a lot of momentum in the modern society. When we talk of identity, the question, which is to be answered, is who am I? Identity is the interaction between self and society. It can be answered with respect to culture, religious freedom, tradition, economic opportunities and better life styles. There are different kinds of identity, national identity, social identity, cultural or racial identity, class identity, familial identity, sexual identity etc. All these identities are formed beyond control, some may have multiple or split identity.

Moving towards globalized world, where distance means very little, people travel liberally to alien lands for achieving dream life they dreamt and with the sense of “permanence of place” constantly challenged. The super power countries encouraging the intellectual slavery to gain power, good economic conditions bribes the brains, who in turn for a shear little intellectual change in life style readily accept what is not theirs. The constant drift of people from the native lands to the foreign is marked by an increasing focus on identities.
Culture is a defining feature of identity of any individual or a society. Culture is an utmost factor contributing to how people see themselves and the communities with which they identify. Every community has its own social values, beliefs, morals, ethics and ways of living, which are inherited from one generation to the other. Food eaten, the type of clothing worn, celebrations of religious rites and political activities and mixing them into only nature, tradition, music, dances and different languages spoken are parts of people’s cultural heritage or the identity which is passed to them by their ancestors. Psychologically, a person wants to retain the identity, which is inherited by birth. Hence, the cultural identity is a state of mind and heart. In an individual, sense of identity is grounded in cultural heritage and ethnic integrity. Culture identity defines who we are and how we are viewed by people.

When culture is a defining feature of identity, language becomes fundamental to cultural identity. Language is a mode to express cultural heritage. As a means of communicating social values, beliefs and customs, it has its own importance. Since the culture of people is expressed in their native languages, it is important to note that people in Diaspora should keep their native languages alive. When we say so, how could one conclude about their own identity? When are they confronting conflict between native
languages with that of English? Does the use of foreign language completely undermine our identity?

Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer, in a speech entitled “The African Writer and the English Language” said, “Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for some one else? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. Nevertheless, for me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it” [1]. He also adds; “I feel that the English will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. However, it will have to be new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings” [2]. Achebe, though adapting a foreign language in his writings, his sense of identity is deep-rooted in African soil.

Language is a means of communicating social values, beliefs and customs. It plays a pivotal role in establishing identity of an individual, a community or a nation. We need to understand that the loss of ethnic languages means loss of identity. As languages disappear, cultures die; consequently, ethnic identity is lost. Hence it is necessary that one should feel free to explore and identify the uniqueness of their ethnic identity,

through the understanding of the cultural diversity that exists in the world around them. This in turn helps our future generation to know about their ancestors, but it will also teach them about themselves and how they are related to the world around them.

A man gives an inheritance to his children and grand children. When we say so, it is usually understood that, we think in terms of money, lands, or possessions. Yet, it is appropriate to think that wise parents leave a good cultural heritage to their children and grand children. This legacy, the value of tradition, history, culture, family honor, and social values should definitely help the future generation to have good understanding to identify themselves. In "The Language of African Literature" Ngugi Wa Thiongo says, "communication between human beings is also the basis and process of evolving culture" [3]. There is a link between communication and culture, which in turn is a combination of moral, ethical and aesthetic values. These values form the basis of people's identity. Hence, the legacy of the family plays an important role in every person, when he relates himself with a society having strong familial identity.

When such statements are made, does education play a role in discovering one's identity? When we study Cornelia Sorabji an early Indian

feminist and her works, the role of education unwinds in identifying oneself. Cornelia Sorabji put her efforts to become a lawyer when the universities of law did not accept a girl student. Having earned a degree of BCL, she became India’s first woman barrister.

Ngugi Wa Thiongo, identifies the most important role of education as its ability to serve as a “means of knowledge about oneself. Therefore, after we have examined ourselves, we radiate outwards and discover people and world’s around us” [4]. Therefore, education is an aspect, which helps a person to have a global identity.

A variety of immigrants have been coming from many countries to United States of America over the years. There is no doubt that these immigrants have made tremendous economic social and political contribution to this country. Having come to the nation for many reasons, seeking liberty, job opportunities and better life styles, their ethnic differences have enriched their history multicultural activities, knowledge and living styles. In order to have the American identity by erasing their native identity, people of Diaspora anglicize their names and suppress their native accent. A number of them even go to the extent of changing, their physical appearance by dyeing their hair and undergoing plastic surgeries,
so as to eliminate any visible sign of their ethnicity. However, the tragic irony is that the people of Diaspora who yearned for the acceptance were never accepted by the white society of America. With such a background when we study the works of Bharati Mukherjee, we come across cultural conflicts in her protagonists.

Bharati Mukherjee was born on 27th July 1940 in a Bengali Brahmin family of Kolkata. She is one of the major novelists of Indian Diaspora. She has received considerable critical attention from almost all the parts of the globe in a very short period of just 25 years. The Indian born American novelist has been widely acknowledged as a ‘voice’ of expatriate-immigrant sensibility. Because she has struggled for identity, first as an exile from India, then as an Indian expatriate in Canada and finally as a migrant in the United States.

Expatriation is a widespread phenomenon in developed countries. Christine Gomez gives us more perspective definition of the term expatriation:

*Expatriation is actually a complex state of mind and emotion, which includes wistful longing for the past, often symbolized by the ancestral home, the pain of exile and homelessness, the struggle to maintain the difference between oneself and the new, unfriendly surroundings, an assumption of moral and*
cultural superiority over the host country and a refusal to accept the identity forced on one by the environment. The expatriate builds a cocoon around herself/himself as refuse from cultural dilemmas and from the experienced hostility or unfriendliness in the new counter [5].

When we study Mukherjee's works with the problems of expatriation and immigration, it is necessary to linger on certain terms closely associated with expatriate sensibility. The main thrust of expatriation is on the native country and traditions left behind. Immigration lays all emphasis on cultural life of the host country. The expatriate dwells on his 'ex' status of the past while the immigrant celebrates the present in the new country.

Bharati Mukherjee admits of being subjected to racial discrimination in Canada. While her husband's creative expertise was recognized, her potentialities went ignored and unresponded to Canada's hostility to Indians and the non-recognition of her writings in Canada are the obsessed themes, which appear in Mukherjee's early works. She experienced herself as psychological expatriate in Canada and clung to her ethnic identity.

Infact, the people who moved out of their ethnic cultural counter have not lost love for their motherland. Moreover, there is so much of cultural mixing that it has given birth to a new culture - hybrid culture. In every country, the highest class or so-called ‘A’ class citizens or elites are worst affected by this phenomenon. As Ashcroff and his colleagues observed:

*Postcolonial culture is inevitably a hybrid phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the grafted European cultural systems and an indigenous ontology, with its impulse to create or recreate an independent local identity. Such construction or reconstruction occurs as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic and “peripheral” subversions of them* [6].

The years between the ‘*The Tiger’s Daughter*’ and ‘*Darkness*’ mark a change in the inner world of Bharati Mukherjee. In the introduction to darkness, she writes “I had thought of myself, inspite of white husband and two assimilated sons, as an expatriate” [7] and like Naipaul “I used a mordant and self protective irony in describing my characters’ pain” [8].

[8] Ibid., p.2
Remarking such statements, Bharati Mukherjee explodes her psychological turmoil. Inspite of having a white family and living in the much-opted alien land, she always framed herself as an expatriate coping with the idea that she had a strong ethnical identity in the native land.

*I have joined imaginative forces with an anonymous driven, underclass of semi assimilated Indians with sentimental attachments to a distant homeland, but no real desire for permanent return. I see my “immigrant” story replicated in dozen American cities and instead of seeing my Indianness as a fragile identity to be preserved against obliterating (or worse, a “visible” disfigurement to be hidden). I see it now as a set of fluid identities to be celebrated. I see myself as an American writer in the tradition of other American writers whose parents or grand parents had passed through Ellies Island. Indianness is now a metaphor, a particular way of partially comprehending the world. Though the characters in these stories are or were “Indian”, I see most of these as stories of broken identities and discarded languages and the will to bond oneself to a new community against the ever present fear of failure and betrayal [9].

As said earlier Bharati Mukherjee had to face psychological and cultural turmoil in process of being labeled as an expatriate or immigrant.

As Bharati Mukherjee writes, she had fluid identities; in turn, she had a crisis in identifying herself, while she yearned for the citizenship of the country which was not hers and not able to leave behind the native land. In the United States of America, Bharati Mukherjee sees herself as an immigrant writer. In her works, she explores the immigrant sensibility recognizing its duality and flexible identity besides, taking into cognizance alternate realities. In the introduction to Darkness, she emphasizes on her position and creative priorities.

Weaving herself as a writer, with the first two novels The Tiger’s Daughter and Wife to her credit, Bharati Mukherjee identified VS Naipaul as her model. In 1977 In Days and Nights in Calcutta, she says;

In myself I detect a pale immature reflection of Naipaul; it is he who has written most movingly about the pain and absurdity of art and exile of ‘third world art’ and exile among the former colonizers, the tolerant incomprehension of host, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a ‘Desh’ [10].

Identification with Naipaul at this stage evidences that Mukherjee treated herself as an expatriate writer. The process of change from expatriation to immigration got off during Mukherjee’s stay in India in 1973.

to 1974. She felt that the year in India had forced her to weave herself more as an immigrant than an exile. The realization of fluid identities and alternate realities could also be traced to this sojourn in India. The movement from expatriation to immigration also reflected in the choice of the writers who shaped Mukherjee's creative sensibility. After outgrowing and discarding posture of an expatriate, she rejected Naipaul as model and chose Bernard Malamud whose central concern was the life of minorities and its agonies. Though partially influenced by Issac Babel, Joseph Conrad and Chekhov, she followed Malamud's as his writings instilled unusual confidence in her.

Like Malmud, I write a minority community which escapes the getto and adapts itself to the patterns of the dominant American culture. Like Malamud's my work seems to find quite naturally a moral center. Issac Babel is another author who is a literary ancestor for me. I also feel a kinship with Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov. But Malmaud most of all speaks to me as writer and I admire his works great deal. Immersing myself in his work gave me the self-confidence to write about my own community [11].

Malmud thought Mukherjee how to overcome being alien in a different cultural milieu. Malmud sketched his characters, which are from the lower strata of the society, a poor classes, and humble shoemakers. On the counter Mukherjee’s immigrant, characters are doctors, university professors, businessmen and women married to upwardly mobile professionals, both addresses themselves to the diasporic experience of cultural alienation. Malmud writings enabled Mukherjee to move her fiction from constantly shifting margin to the unstable shifting center with no fixed place. The characters feel that they are lost in the changing forces of cultural life. Hence they go in search of themselves. The feeling of insecurity gives rise to crisis in their minds. Many of Mukherjee’s immigrants speak and act American. The immigrant characters dream westward, especially to California, the farthest geographical distance from their eastern routes, where possibly they can reshape their lives. It was this indebtedness to Malmud that prompted Mukherjee to dedicate her first collection of stories, *Darkness* to the great Jewish writer.

Mukherjee’s approach to life and its problems is deeply rooted in her Indian upbringing. Mukherjee in her fictions handles western themes and settings as well as characters that are westernized or bicultural. Yet, she is
forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu and essentially moral.

In Alison interview, she draws demarcating line between Naipaul and herself and writers of the third world countries. Naipaul writes about living in perceptual exile and the impossibilities of ever having a home. Like Naipaul, “I am writer from the third world, but unlike him I left India by choice to settle in the US. I have adopted this country as my home. I view myself as an American author in the tradition of other American authors whose ancestors arrived in Ellies Island” [12].

Having ascertained her affinity with America as her home and she an American author, why does she have an inferiority of being a writer of the third world country? Stressing to be American, does Bharati Mukherjee has a crisis in her identity?

Bharati Mukherjee is her own theorist and exemplar. Emphasizing her American citizenship, she tends to downgrade her Indian heritage and affiliations. During the tour to India in 1987, she refused to answer questions about her “Indianness” several times. Yet people saw her sari-clad, dark-eyed, dark-haired, retaining an obvious Bengali-Brahmin name, and heard

[12] Alison B.Carb, An Interview with Bharathi Mukherjee, p. 650
her use Indian material in the extracts she read from her fictions. Mukherjee shrugs off her own Indianness and claims that her immigrants move away from their origins in India. Yet one can easily find echoes of Indian English, Indian sensibility in her writings. Bharati Mukherjee’s Indian characters in search of American citizenship retain sufficient Indianness to be exotic but they float gleefully into the American materialism. Presenting her character so, she underscores the repudiation of Indian culture and literary influence.