

## Cultural Clash and Identity Construction in Bharti Mukherjee's *Miss New India*

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### Abstract:

*A sizable segment of world's population, wedged between different socio-political and cultural domains, between homes, and between different allegiances, is uprooted and residing in diasporic communities in America other countries across the globe. Bharti Mukherjee, the most eminent Indian diaspora writer of immigrant experiences overseas has espoused the cause of South Asian women immigrants in America. As displayed by her literary corpus,*

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*Mukherjee's preoccupation has been with India and America and her forte lies in channelizing her submissive protagonists' way from dismal India to assertive individuals in glorified America. Having experienced the nuances of life in East and West she has most wonderfully depicted in her fiction, the inner turmoil and sufferings of these women who find themselves crushed between the pulls of ancient and the modern and still emerge as conquerors like the gold passing through a heat furnace. In her most recent novel *Miss New India*, unlike her other novels, Mukherjee has brought this stark contrast between Eastern and Western culture to India as the protagonist Anjali de-roots herself from her age old village Gauripur in long forgotten Bihar and re-roots herself in hi-tech cyber city of Bangalore. This paper is an attempt to articulate the protagonist's undying zeal which enables her to overcome the trauma suffered due to clash of cultures and construct a new identity in an alien city.*

**Key words:** uprooted, diaspora, sufferings, conquerors, identity

Advancement in transportation and telecommunications, colonization and desire of better education or work has lead in the past and is still leading to a large scale migration of people, thoughts and ideas globally. Basically, the insatiable greed of man to achieve more makes him relocate himself and his family in an alien land leading to economic and cultural interdependence of activities and this relocation comes with a price tag. The immigrants experience a myriad of feelings of nostalgia, alienation, suppression, frustration, anger, identity crisis, resistance, humiliation and moral dilemmas due to the stark contrast of cultures of homeland and adopted land. All these feelings of diaspora immigrants are the fulcrum of Mukherjee's literary oeuvre. In her earlier novels, Mukherjee has presented only one India with its rearward ways, sluggish pace, conventional people, subduing men and dearth of opportunities. However, in the present novel, through Anjali's odyssey, Mukherjee has depicted the social and cultural conditions of two simultaneously existing Indias which are in

stark contrast with each other. As its namesake, she has brought to fore her knowledge of influence of Western ideals on the young Indians in the advent of globalization and focused on emerging new India with its endless opportunities. Here, Gauripur denotes all that is old and decrepit for Bangalore, the avant-garde city of skyscrapers and call centers. The Silicon city holds a promise of liberty, big bucks and quick success for Anjali who decides to break free from the shackles of her autocratic father in a patriarch society.

Born as a second daughter to a stout Bengali railway clerk with a meager income and his housewife in a traditional phallogocentric society, which upholds that a girl always needs protection of her father then husband, Anjali Bose has the audacity to chase her dreams and seek an identity of her own, unshadowed by a man. Anjali, the young, tall, smart girl with big eyes, beautiful features and Bachelors degree in Commerce is all set to marry a boy of her father's choice as per the prevailing culture of her society. She belongs to a society where female sexuality is not seen as a personal or private matter, but a family concern whether it is marriage, education or any other activity associated with their lives. Simone de Beauvoir throws light on the condition of the fairer sex in the society:

“This humanity is male and man defines women not in herself but as relative to HIM, SHE is not regarded as autonomous being...she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not HE with reference to HER; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, HE is the absolute - SHE is the other”<sup>1</sup>.

Even after being a witness to her elder sisters' failed marriage to a groom selected by their father, who was discovered to be a drunkard and adulterer very late, she is ready to submit to her father's whims of match making and doing away with his utmost responsibility in her form. Such is the conditioning done to the girls in the families. Her father, an old fashioned patriarch, pushed his elder daughter Sonali in a pathetic

condition where she has to stay in a rented apartment in Patna and work longer hours in office as a typist clerk to support herself and her four years old daughter, Piyali. He considers her merely as a divorced single mother who is disgrace to the family and yet again chooses a reckless boy for his younger daughter Anjali in the name of upholding the family tradition. Anjali's mother rebuked by her father for giving birth only to daughters, doesn't have much choice in the case either and always backs him. "You see what state you have reduced to me, woman, by not bearing sons? All my brothers are fathers of son. But me? Two donkeys for daughters...Donkey for wife, donkeys for daughters... Ill luck is ill Luck"<sup>2</sup>. For him and other traditional people in their culture, sons are the ones to take lineage forward and daughters are nothing more than a burden. The sole motive of allowing girls to get some education is to enhance their marriage prospects to attract more suitable grooms. "that B.Com degree would increase her stock in the marriage market"<sup>3</sup>. But, for Anjali and many others like her, education brings aspirations and resentment against prevailing customs which put shackles on their dreams. "even, at nineteen, Anjali was determined not to yield her right to happiness"<sup>4</sup>. Her enlightened inner conscience leads her to quietly despise marriage. "Her classes were dull. She wanted something exciting, life changing, to save her from the tedium of Gauripur"<sup>5</sup>. Mukherjee has delineated the miserable position of women in traditionally old India in form of Sonali and Anjali's mother as its true representatives who are always at receiving end and Anjali as representative of modern Indian woman with her own individual voice who knows the ways to make herself heard. Anjali's well-intentioned American teacher, Peter Champion, whom she has a secret crush on and who is a gay, seeing her charismatic personality and fluent American accent in English, helps her with money and contacts to make it big in India's IT capital.

Anjali, torn between traditional culture and her modern day desires, takes the final step of repudiating all bonds with her family and native place to follow her dreams in an alien land on being raped by her would-be groom on their first meeting alone. She then decides to break away from a culture in which she cannot even think of discussing this horrible crime committed to her due to fear of utter disgrace to her and her family. For Subodh, educated in America and influenced by Western culture, having physical relation with a girl before marriage is something trivial but for Anjali raised in conservative Indian culture, it is absolute dishonor. Even education does not lead Indian girls to disavow their roots and mental makeup. It is at this point that she realizes the futility of her existence and everything around her. She just leaves a letter for her parents stating her reasons and desires before embarking on her journey of a lifetime. Relying on suggestions, money and connections provided by Peter Champion, she lands in the Silicon Valley to make a big bang and construct a new identity. Upon her arrival in alien city Bangalore, Peter's contact Minnie Bagehot, the widow landlady of once magnificent Bagehot Mansion turned Boarding House built by her British official husband in colonial India, who lives in a cocoon of self constructed fictitious past, is of no help to Anjali to skyway cultural tremors at the very onset of her new life. "This was the first morning of her new life, but it felt like death"<sup>6</sup>. The feelings of loneliness and nostalgia engulf her. "She had nothing to lose, no good name to tarnish. No one knew her parents, and her parents had no idea where she was"<sup>7</sup>. She is at the initial stage of trauma of Mukherjee's diaspora immigrant who has left his home country and is unsure of future in the host country. American imprint on every other thing in the city gives her a sense arrival on a completely different planet.

Huge American cars, many with women drivers, snaked around her auto-rickshaw. To avoid panicking, she concentrated her gaze in the direction of the footpath that had

to run alongside the road, but the footpaths-Sidewalk, she told herself, think American- had been torn up to make way for new servers (83).

Names of many places, buildings and even residents of Bangalore represent the colonial background of the city. "But Bangalore retained British place names too, like Kew Gardens and Cubbon Park" <sup>8</sup>.

The cultural shock through people and surroundings starts affecting her identity. She notices the extreme difference between the culture of Gauripur and Bangalore. From a culture where society, family and rituals come first, "Family weddings and funerals are the incontestable duties and rituals of Indian Life"<sup>9</sup>, she is now in a metropolitan culture where women smoke, girls keep two boyfriends, one for easy rides at the work and another for sheer fun, "Their friendship didn't seem like lead-ins to marriage. The young people in Bangalore had no parents, no nearby families to appease"<sup>10</sup>. She hears the offending words being used casually by the young in coffee shops and bars. Unlike Mukherjee's previous novels, though this novel is set wholly in the Indian backdrop, American culture and beliefs play a larger role here than anywhere in her fiction. When people migrate and set foot in an alien land lured by its lucrative life, McLeod remarks in *Beginning Post-Colonialism*, they carry with them to "new places"<sup>11</sup> their "beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values"<sup>12</sup> along with their "possessions or belongings"<sup>13</sup>. There they face this insurmountable challenge to abandon the culture of their native land to embrace the prevalent culture.

Anjali has to face another hurdle of language in Bangalore. She is unable to comprehend the local language. "The language sounded so alien"<sup>14</sup>. The American accent makes her feel, "Strange monsters dwelt in the linguistic interstices of the English language"<sup>15</sup>. Her confidence starts to shake. Regarding her English proficiency she confesses to Mrs. Bagehot, "I've only been in Bangalore a few hours and I have

already heard much better English than I'm capable of”<sup>16</sup>. However, her qualities “stubborn, headstrong, impulsive and inappropriately outgoing”<sup>17</sup> ridiculed in her home town, give her a head start to make her place, among adventurous and determined group of young call centre working girls staying on rent, in Bagehot house.

After initial difficulties, Anjali is thrilled to secure herself a place, based on her absorptive capacity, character and ability to learn, in Usha Desai's call centre training institute recommended by Peter. This she feels is her gateway to becoming salaried, independent career woman through a call center job. On achieving her aim to be a call center employee she is on cloud nine. At times her feelings are contrasting. On scanning her contrasting lives in Gauripur and Bangalore she says, “I didn't have a life in Gauripur. I am here to dictate the terms of happiness”<sup>18</sup>. The irony is she becomes aware of the Indian people working at call centers flaunting fake identities, accents and names. “All those high-fiving, caffeine-fired call agents with made-up American names: Darren, Will, Mike, Brad, Tom, Fred, Hank, Paul, Josh, Jeff. And Mukesh/Mickey Sharma, the sicko-caller from champagne”<sup>19</sup>. Mukherjee's concept of fluid identities is easily comprehensible in reference to call centers employees. Anjali ponders over the reality of the city she has come to forge her identity in, “She could kill off Angie Bose, and who would know, or care? She could be anything she wanted, a Hindi-speaking girl from Varanasi or a Brahmin from Kolkata. Who do you want to be?”<sup>20</sup>. Anjali feels out of place on her very first day in Bangalore, “She understood, in a way: Bangalore excited her, but it left her depressed. All the money made people go slightly crazy”<sup>21</sup>.

Hastily she adopts the culture and accent and finds herself attracted to a rich businessman Mr. GG who also seems to kind of like her. Anjali's act of having casual sexual relation with GG confirms her assimilation in the new culture. This is the same Anjali who feels dishonored on sexual advances made

by her suitor Subodh Mitra before marriage back in Gauripur. She seems to enjoy her newly acquired promiscuity which displays her fluid identity clearly. "She was starting her life over. She was starring in the Bollywood version of her breakout from Gauripur. Bangalore! Bangalore!"<sup>22</sup> She admits about her transformation, "I'm a woman now, she said to herself. I'm quite a woman. I'm hot, according to Tookie. Secretive and oh so mysterious, according to Husseina Sherbet-cool, sherbet-refreshing, according to Moni. And funny and fascinating, if I'm reading Mr. GG correctly"<sup>23</sup>. Anjali, who urges her teacher Peter to call her Angie in the village, lives the life of dual personality from the beginning of the novel. She impersonates Angie effortlessly, "Without even trying, Anjali slipped into her high wattage Angie persona. Angie was smart, sexy, and special"<sup>24</sup>. On one hand where Anjali represents the passive side, Angie is the confident persona on the other, "She could not be held responsible for anything that happened in her life because she was not an initiator of actions. Angie the bold one, the initiator, was beyond blame or shame. Anjali just watched and let things happen"<sup>25</sup>. Peter Champion's comments at a dinner party, where he talks about prosperity as a good thing and wishes it was rooted to something, building something beyond glass monuments, are noteworthy. Prosperity otherwise seems as temporary as a kite or a balloon to him. She has her taste of difficult times when she is linked as close friend to one of her roommates Husseina Shiraz and is brutally grabbed by police for a terror plot and murder of Minnie Bagehot. While Anjali detested her father's rules, at least they were crystal clear - in Bangalore, she is never sure who to trust. When rough time hits, she thinks that her parents were right. They warned her that everyone in the world is corrupt and conspiracies are rampant everywhere in the world. In Bangalore, after undergoing so many trials and being tortured in the lockup cell, the harsh reality of life dawns upon her and she is found grappling with crisis of identity.



Her excitement of achieving this long desired job, where she would earn many times more than her father and elder sister, is short lived. Shortly she finds herself at the verge of losing her call center job when she is discovered losing her balance under pressure and deteriorating language skills. This blow comes with apprehension of falling short of Peter's money, losing accommodation at Bagehot House, and being compelled to return to Gauripur for better. She offers to change but her supervisor advises her not to, as she was not made to serve, submission was not in her personality. She is forced to board public buses rather than private auto-rickshaws with instant effect. The immediate problem was that she didn't even know the bus route back to Bagehot house. Mukherjee's "novels express the impulses of Indians, who, in their search for a better life, face the problems of adaptation and survival"<sup>26</sup>.

On knowing about the death of her father and her mother's shifting to Patna with her elder sister through Peter's letter, she feels sorry and blames herself for ruining everyone's lives. Her whole world comes crumbling at her feet. However, keeping in line with Mukherjee's brave protagonists she gathers courage, pulls herself up like a phoenix rising from ashes, and directs her efforts to gain another job as real estate agent and comes to terms with her newly constructed identity formed after complete transformation. Anjali pulls through and assimilates in the alien city as she does not halt but moves on. Her deep conviction is evident when she says:

"My new beginning is here. But, different from Baba's and Ma's generation. They had to fight the British; their big fight was to establish an Independent India and create a nonaligned world. Theirs was a struggle ---lost, in Baba's case against communalism and casteism and poverty and superstition and too much religion. They were lucky. Their fights were not easy, but simpler and clearer than mine....Poverty terrified Baba. But, I 'm terrified, tempted and corrupted by the infusion of vast sums of new capital"<sup>27</sup>.

Anjali's journey from Gauripur in old India to Bangalore in newly emerging bold India is a metaphor for her journey from ignorance to enlightenment, from self doubt to self empowerment, from identity crisis to identity construction.

## END NOTES

1. Beauvoir 1983, 86.
2. Mukherjee 2012, 24.
3. Mukherjee 2012, 8.
4. Mukherjee 2012, 7.
5. Mukherjee 2012, 11.
6. Mukherjee 2012, 78.
7. Mukherjee 2012, 81.
8. Mukherjee 2012, 83.
9. Mukherjee 2012, 7.
10. Mukherjee 2012, 92.
11. McLeod 2000, 211.
12. McLeod 2000, 211.
13. McLeod 2000, 211.
14. Mukherjee 2012, 82.
15. Mukherjee 2012, 104.
16. Mukherjee 2012, 134.
17. Mukherjee 2012, 17.
18. Mukherjee 2012, 83.
19. Mukherjee 2012, 132.
20. Mukherjee 2012, 95.
21. Mukherjee 2012, 97.
22. Mukherjee 2012, 200.
23. Mukherjee 2012, 227.
24. Mukherjee 2012, 207.
25. Mukherjee 2012, 222.
26. Devi, 244-245.
27. Mukherjee 2012, 304.

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