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The Role of Assimilation and Maximalism in Reshaping Identities of Diaspora

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Abstract:

This paper examines the role of assimilation in reshaping the identities of immigrant characters in the writings of diaspora. Breaking out of an expatriate shell, the displaced people try to subvert any dominant discourse and, instead, enter into a dialogue relation with the new culture. Cultural assimilation refers to an intense process of consistent integration when members of an ethnocultural group, typically immigrants or other minority groups, attain a new identity. A novel understanding of assimilation that acknowledges the transformative effects of immigrants' integration on mainstream culture is also discussed in the paper. The paper provides insight into Bharati Mukherjee's 'Maximalist credo', a credo for the new immigrant writers. Mukherjee is of the view that America has a stagnant 'Minimalist fiction' of the mainstream. She claims maximalism as a solution to introduce diversity in the mainstream. In her work *Jasmine*, she presents an illegal female immigrant who seeks to expand the margins of what one may call the American experience. The protagonist is willing to make whatever compromises are necessary to strike roots in the new world, however much the new values may collide with previously held sanctities.

Keywords: Assimilation, Acculturation, Maximalist Credo, Melting Pot, Transformation

Introduction

Upon the arrival of a new ethnic group in a novel environment, it experiences a process of adjustment or assimilation. The assimilation process may encompass the political, social, cultural and economic integration of groups historically regarded as external to or marginalised from full engagement in mainstream society. Robert Park initially delineated the stages of racial and ethnic assimilation as contact, competition, accommodation, and ultimately assimilation. Park delineated four stages that newly arrived immigrant groups undergo as they acclimate to American society.

The initial stage involves contact, during which groups first meet one another.

The second stage involves compaction, wherein groups compete for access to political, economic, and social resources. Adjacent to the aforementioned two is accommodation, wherein disparate

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groups start to acclimate to one another in ostensibly harmonious and constructive manners. The concluding phase is assimilation, which Park characterized as “a process of interment ratio and fusion in which person and groups acquire the memories, sentiments and attitudes of other persons or groups and are, by sharing their experience and history, incorporated with them in a common cultural life”(Park 26). Park's typology may appear simplistic or antiquated in modern contexts; however, it continues to offer a valuable framework that underpins much of the contemporary research on assimilation.

In the essay "Ganga in the Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature" published in "A Meeting of Streams: South Asian Canadian Literature", Uma Parameswaran outlines four stages that immigrants in Canada go through. The first phase is about immigrants feeling sad and longing for the world they left behind. In the second phase, they focus on family and work because they want to get by. The third phase is about second-generation Canadians with South Asian backgrounds. They care about what is happening in their ethnic community. The fourth phase emphasizes that home is now in this new country.

By finding Ganga in the Assiniboine, Parameswaran presents a cosmopolitan view of cultural assimilation. She recommends that wherever we are, that is our home. One should culturally assimilate with the people of the host country and should contribute to the progress of the whole world. As she aptly writes: "Home is where the feet are, and we had better place our heart where the feet are" (30). Parameswaran aptly asserts in "Ganga in the Assiniboine: Prospects for Indo-Canadian Literature":

“Every immigrant transplants part of his native land to the new country, and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees his native river in the river that seems in his adopted place, not Ganga as the Assiniboine or the Assiniboine as the Ganga, both of which imply a simple transference or substitution, but Ganga in the Assiniboine, which implies a flowing into, a merger that enriches the river. The confluence of any two rivers is sacred for the Hindu ethos, perhaps because it is symbolic of this enrichment. In the literary context of the immigrant experience, this image has an added dimension. At the confluence, the rivers are distinct, and one can see the seam of the two separate streams as they join.” (79-80)

For the last fifty years, the prevailing perspective on assimilation has been straightforward and unidirectional: immigrants and their offspring relinquish their ancestral identities to conform to the cultural and social conventions of an idealized Anglo-American mainstream. This perspective underscores the necessity for immigrants to "unlearn" their cultural traits to "effectively assimilate into the new way of life required for complete acceptance," We propose a novel understanding of assimilation that acknowledges the transformative effects of immigrants' integration on the

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mainstream culture.

As Joel Kuortti aptly asserts, “Diasporic South Asians are not merely assimilating to their host cultures, but they are also actively reshaping them through their new voices bringing new definitions of identity” (6).

Assimilation can transpire not solely through alterations in the newcomer, but also within the mainstream culture. The mainstream can integrate elements from other cultures; for instance, America is swiftly positioning itself as a global nation, where even a Republican politician must frequently communicate in Spanish to attract voters. Permitting Sikh police officers to wear turbans in the U.S. represents progress in religious accommodations.

Cultural Assimilation and Acculturation:

Cultural assimilation is a process wherein the language and culture of one individual or group converge with those of another group. This term applies to both individuals and groups, encompassing immigrants or natives who culturally dominate another society. Cultural assimilation transpires when immigrants integrate into the prevailing culture, effectively adopting it as an intrinsic part of their identity.

According to Gordon, acculturation is the process of adopting the cultural norms and behavioural patterns of the dominant group. He believed that this process is a fundamental part of the experiences of cultural groups. For a long time, Gordon's definition of acculturation had a significant influence on the literature of social science. It helped us understand acculturation as the changes that immigrant groups experience when they try to become part of the dominant group. Gordon posited that the alterations intrinsic to the acculturation process were more pronounced in external aspects (e.g., attire, language, overt emotional expression), whereas fundamental personal characteristics (e.g., values, norms, or religious beliefs) would require a protracted duration to transform if transformation occurred at all.

More recently, the sociologist Herbert Gans (1999) has defined acculturation as the “newcomers’ adoption of the culture, that is the behaviour patterns or practices, values, rules, symbols and so forth, of the host society or rather an overly homogenized and reified conception of it” (162). This definition recognises that a group's culture acts as a barrier. Concurrently, Gans delineates assimilation as an interactive process that may not necessitate alterations in an individual's values or beliefs, unlike acculturation and is best exemplified by behaviours where “the newcomers move out of formal and informal ethnic associations and other social institutions and into the host society’s non-ethnic ones” (162). Generally, first-generation individuals demonstrate minimal levels of acculturation. Acculturation occurs when ethnic groups engage in direct contact with the host society, leading to modifications in both groups.

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Akin to Bhabha's theory of hybridity i.e. the idea of occupying in-between space that is of being intermixed peoples, Uma Parameswaran creates a third space through her works. A new Canada where there is real understanding and mutual love between the immigrants and the natives. In the opening lines of "SACLIT: An Introduction", Parameswaran states:

"For the last few years, I have been focusing on the writings of the Indian diaspora. I am particularly interested in the literature of the South-Asian diaspora in Canada. Within Canada, I have been working towards the recognition of South-Asian-Canadian writers as part of Canadian Literature..." (Parameswaran 1)

Acculturation can be defined as a dynamic and multidimensional process occurring when distinct cultures engage in sustained contact. It encompasses varying levels and occurrences of cultural acquisition and preservation, dependent on individual, collective, and contextual factors. Acculturation is dynamic due to its continuous and variable nature, and it is multidimensional as it occurs across various indices of psychosocial functioning, leading to multiple adaptation outcomes. It refers to the modifications in attitudes, values, or behaviours exhibited by members of one group towards the norms of another, specifically the host country group. The term "melting pot" has historically been used to describe cultural integration, particularly in the context of the formation of the American nation.

In 1782, Hector de Crevecoeur first articulated the theory of the melting pot. He envisioned America evolving into a nation characterized by an entirely new race that would ultimately influence global dynamics through its workforce and ensuing descendants. The play titled "The Melting Pot" by Israel Zangwill addressed the pro-immigrant sentiment that coexisted with the increasing pressure for restrictions. Originally released in 1908, it narrates the tale of a Jewish boy who runs away from Russia to escape persecution and settles in New York City. He falls in love and, despite numerous challenges, pledges to marry and combine their strengths to forge a more resilient and productive America. The drama contends that rather than erasing ethnic differences, each group of newcomers contributes a distinct array of strengths.

It also asserts that assimilation can and does occur organically, benefiting both the newcomer and the native-born individuals. As Peter Kivisto in "What is the Canonical Theory of Assimilation" points out, "The criticism that the melting pot produces a society that primarily reflects the dominant culture instead of fusing into a completely new entity is reiterated by other sociologists, anthropologists and cultural geographers as Anglo-Conformity"(151). All long-term trends suggest that the melting pot operated as expected during the twentieth century. Immigrants primarily relinquished their native language and culture, ethnic enclaves disintegrated as economic and occupational mobility increased, and the incidence of ethnic and religious intermarriage escalated.

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Melting Pot**

The term "melting pot" evokes the image of a bubbling cauldron into which immigrants enter, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, and are rapidly assimilated into obscurity. The issue is not the assimilation of minorities into the white majority, but rather the integration of these diverse groups into a new amalgamation, which is the literal interpretation of "melting pot." Contemporary immigrants engage with a society that exhibits significantly greater tolerance for ethnic diversity. The ideology of multiculturalism celebrates ethnic diversity and offers institutional frameworks, such as bilingual education, to preserve the language and culture of immigrants. The melting pot narrative describes the assimilation process in which diverse cultural and ethnic communities within a nation unite to form a new "American" culture. Mukherjee posits in *American Dreamer* that the American "melting pot" dismantled "old-world concepts of a fixed, exclusive national identity." This shift allowed her to transition from the irony and detachment of expatriation present in her earlier narratives to embrace "the exuberance of immigration" (*Darkness xv*). It was a mindset that enabled her to confront the intricacies of identity formation within the cultural context of the New World.

The fluid and contingent dynamics of the "melting pot" provided Mukherjee with a novel direction. Latinos and Caribbeans, representing contemporary immigration, have established cohesive ethnic communities characterised by a robust economy and foreign language media, including cable television, which offer institutional support for language and culture. Moreover, in contrast to previous immigrants, contemporary immigrants benefit from accessible communication and affordable airfare to their countries of origin. Additionally, many arrive equipped with solid educational backgrounds, professional expertise, and often financial resources, enabling them to maintain their ethnic identities without sacrificing them for economic necessity. In the contemporary global economy, being multilingual and multicultural is an asset rather than a disadvantage.

Maximalist Credo

Currently, immigrant communities are promoting a novel form of assimilation termed "selective acculturation." They equate it with multiculturalism and its purported pathologies. For indigenous groups such as those in the United States. Multiculturalism in English would lead to linguistic diversity and the fragmentation of the nation along ethnic divisions. Bharati Mukherjee's "Maximalist credo" serves as a guiding principle for contemporary immigrant authors. Mukherjee posits that America possesses a stagnant form of 'Minimalist fiction' within the mainstream. She advocates for maximalism as a means to incorporate diversity into the mainstream. She portrays immigrants who are self-assured and resistant to assimilating into the American mainstream. They will broaden the parameters of what can be termed the American experience.

Bharati Mukherjee's exuberant tone regarding her Maximalist Credo emphasizes the significance of transformation. Bharati Mukherjee perceives herself as an immigrant writer in

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America. In her works, she examines the immigrant sensibility, acknowledging its duality and malleable identity. In the introduction to *Darkness*, she elucidates her stance and artistic priorities, stating, "The transformation as a writer and as a denizen of the new world transpired with the act of immigrating to America." It signifies a transition from the detachment of expatriation to the vitality of immigration.

Mukherjee identifies as an American author. Mukherjee asserts, "My role as an author is to render my complex and unfamiliar world accessible to mainstream American readers." She views herself as both the custodian and interpreter of the experiences conveyed by immigration. She critiques authors such as Updike and Cheever. Mukherjee asserts that Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner attained a degree of international readership. The subsequent authors elevated by commercial enthusiasm were those who feigned to represent America. The subjects examined were restricted to categories such as Vietnam, "dead-end jobs, and midlife crises." Mukherjee described "minimalism" as a skilful shorthand for an experience that was purportedly typical, yet it overlooked the significant transformations occurring in America. Bharati Mukherjee articulates her "Maximalist" philosophy:

"I can imagine a poster over the United States Court House: welcome maximalists, hello expansionists. The New America I know and have been living in for the last seven years is a world, by definition of doubles... They have all shed past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again. They are bursting with stories, too many to begin telling. They have lived through centuries of history in a single lifetime... Village born, colonized, traditionally raised, educated. What they have assimilated in 30 years has taken the West 10 times that number two years to create. Time travel is a reality... I have seen it in my own life. Bionic men and women are living among us." (Mukherjee 29)

Mukherjee's concept of Maximalist credo hinges on the importance of transformation. She emphasizes the fluidity of identity. According to her: I observe my immigration narrative mirrored in numerous American cities, and rather than perceiving my Indianness as a delicate identity to be safeguarded from erasure (or, worse, a 'visible' blemish to be concealed), I now regard it as a collection of dynamic identities to be embraced. I perceive myself as an American author in the lineage of other American writers whose ancestors traversed Ellis Island. Indianness has become a metaphor, a specific method of partially understanding the world. Mukherjee's *Jasmine* exemplifies the fluid identity of immigrants.

The narrative centres on Jyoti Vijn, who was born in a village in Punjab and became a widow due to a terrorist bombing. She subsequently discovers a route to New York using counterfeit documents and adeptly adjusts to the illicit employment opportunities accessible to such immigrants.

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Throughout her transformations, she adopts numerous names, each signifying a new stage in her integration with America. By the conclusion of the novel, the protagonist remains in the process of acclimating to America. She is pregnant with one man's child and elopes with another man to seek a new aspiration for happiness in America, a land of boundless opportunities. Mukherjee extols the concept of adaptability and transformation in Jasmine.

The novel *Jasmine* chronicles the events leading to Jasmine's transformation from a rural girl into a contemporary American woman. Each transformation or alteration of identity constitutes a form of suicide and rebirth. Physical violence is an essential element in the process of reincarnation. Jasmine acknowledges that "it's a free country" (Mukherjee 239) and consequently sheds the persona of Jane, embracing the frontier values of "adventure, risk and transformation" (Mukherjee 240). Jasmine, akin to Du, is conceived by Mukherjee to adapt, transform, and navigate the conflicting realms of the postmodern world. Her capacity to do so justifiably designates her as 'Americanized.' Jasmine possesses the exact capability to adapt herself to the current environment. She undergoes multiple transformations in pursuit of a promising future. She embodies the essence of assimilation. She exhibits no reluctance in associating herself with a technologized America. Jasmine's adaptability is most clearly articulated in the statement, 'They tell me I have the accent, but I don't sound Iowan either. I am like one of those voices on the telephone, very clear and soothing. Maybe Northern California, they say. Du says they're computer generated'" (Mukherjee 10-11).

For Jasmine, the most prominent aspect of America is the potential for transformation: "We'd start with new fates, new stars" (Mukherjee 77). She enjoys integrating with the mainstream and assimilating its neo-nationalism. Jasmine can undergo transformation into complete otherness through a sequential process of rebirth. Jasmine's homicide of her assailant is a significant occurrence illustrating how violence catalyses an immigrant's transformation. The scene is characterized by multiple forms of violence: physical, metaphorical, and allegorical. After experiencing rape, she can annihilate her previous identity, akin to the practice of sati, and is reborn as Kali, depicted with an open mouth, spilling blood, and a protruding red tongue, embodying the duality of the Goddess as both destroyer and preserver. Lillian and Mother Ripplemeyer will arrive at the opportune moment to provide assistance when it is most required. These maternal figures serve as catalysts for Jasmine's de-selfing. Jasmine, the titular protagonist, ultimately emerges as the survivor, pursuing new opportunities. She does not bear the weight of the past; instead, she repeatedly emerges as a transformed individual. Mukherjee comments on her literary creations:

"I don't think about my fiction as being about alienation. On the contrary, I mean for it to be about assimilation. My stories centre on a new breed and generation of North American pioneers. I am fascinated by the people who have enough gumption, energy, and ambition, to pull up their roots. My stories are irrelevant and I like to think, funny. My stories are about conquests, and not about

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loss.” (Hancock 17)

Conclusion

Maximalism depicts immigrants who are opportunistic and traverse the country with ease. Maximalism seeks to highlight the plight of illegal immigrants and to integrate this experience into contemporary American literature. The immigrants willingly embrace hospitality for the experience of the unfamiliar, rather than fearing it. In another context, Clarke Blaise referred to the process as “dehousing” and “rehousing.” The immigration of the inner consciousness commences with the decision to relocate to a desired yet unfamiliar environment; the actual relocation is merely a physical detail. Consequently, the immigrant is prepared to make any necessary compromises to establish themselves in the new world, regardless of how the new values may conflict with previously held beliefs.

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