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## **The Literature of Diaspora and Challenged Ethnicity: Theory and Practice in the Writing of Bharati Mukherjee**

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### **Abstract**

*The literature of Diaspora deals with such challenged ethnicity and provides sufficient evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted alone; the margins have also been expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space. This inevitably demands the need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural mechanics as well as the construction of a new culture born out of the transparent translation in a diasporic space. Thus, the textual mapping of the colonial encounter concludes with the new 'migrant' novel, a form which is explicit in its commitment to hybridity. Such trans-cultural narrative possesses a serious challenge to the cultural stability of the metropolitan centers. In its transformational quality, Diaspora is typically a site of hybridity which questions fixed identities based on mono-centric essentialisms. In reaction to the literature and myth of expatriation Mukherjee endorses the literature of immigration, representing the neo-national spirit of America.*

***Key Words: Diaspora, ethnicity, space, margins, cultures, bicultural mechanics, transparent translation, hybridity, mono-centric essentialisms, expatriation, immigration.***

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In the context of diaspora there is a process of structuring the shared identities in the making of a new subjectivity. Instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic and polyphonic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self. This is the same kind of assertiveness that is present in Brah's use of the term 'homing desire,'<sup>i</sup> simultaneously expressing a desire to construct a home in the new diasporic location and leaving the whole concept of 'home' open to analysis and criticism.

This process of a 'homing diaspora' does not imply a nostalgic desire for 'roots,' nor 'is it the same as the desire for a 'homeland'; it is realized instead as a construction of 'multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries.'<sup>ii</sup> Questions of origin and Diaspora come up with particular surface-tensions between internationalism and nationalism; the relationship between place and identity; and the ways cultures and literatures interact. In the process of diasporic cross-over new patterns of mobility are being drawn on the familiar landscape of migration and exilic exclusions. Bhabha projects culture as hybrid from the side of migrant and subaltern.

Bhabha's disjunctive temporality is analogical to Salman Rushdie's notion of 'broken mirror'<sup>iii</sup> about the migrant. Rushdie even generalizes the excitement of the 'homeless' when he says: 'But human beings do not perceive things whole. We are not gods but wounded creatures, cracked lenses,

capable of fractured perceptions.’<sup>iv</sup> The migrant’s or expatriate’s cracked and fractured self have been indicated by Bhabha, using Lacan’s notion as ‘the twilight existence of the aesthetic images.’<sup>v</sup>

The literature of Diaspora deals with such challenged ethnicity and provides sufficient evidence of the fact that diasporic space is pressing on the space of the home country. It is not that the centre has shifted alone; the margins have also been expanded to push the home cultures further to outer space. This inevitably demands the need to realize the significance of the cultural encounter which takes place in diasporic writing, the bicultural mechanics as well as the refashioning of the self born out of the transparent translation in a diasporic space. The process results in ‘[u]ndoing, dissolution, decomposition [which] are accompanied by processes of growth, transformation, and the reformulation of old elements in new patterns.’<sup>vi</sup>

Refashioning of self is a dire disciplinary struggle in Bharati Mukherjee’s fictions. The immigrants in an inevitable cultural politics transform their self to emerge with a new identity like Jasmine, Tara Cartwright, Dimple and Tara Chatterjee. The process of reincarnation once started, through dislocations and re-locations, the women in Bharati Mukherjee’s fictions cannot regress back nor can they stop it. The only thing they resort to, is to be re-placed into the New World with violence, rupturing the body, mind and soul in a strategy of sequential and ongoing illumination or resort to root search. Mukherjee’s comments on her works sums up it all:

Violence is very connected with Diaspora and the trans-planting from one’s original culture into a new country, no matter for what reason we’ve come to the new country, implies or necessitates death of one’s former self or mutilation of one’s former self and so I want to think that the physical violence in my metaphorical or artistic way of showing the psychic damage that takes place.<sup>vii</sup>

Bharati Mukherjee is not a feminist as such. Her characters flaunt general feminism, a paradigm celebrating fluid identities, centered and focused on the transcendence of soul. Feminism presents a very different sort of connotation for Bharati Mukherjee: ‘It’s certainly not a conscious decision to write as a woman writer but I find that quite naturally my main protagonists are rather strong woman who avert themselves sometimes physically and always very emotionally.’<sup>viii</sup> Mukherjee here prefers to go for an emphatic positioning of herself as a female writer. She sounds little harsh, though her anger and attitude can be justified. She goes for multiple time frames, the multiple spaces, the present location and the space of the past. She also envisions the cultural displacement and the space of the ‘cultural relativism’<sup>ix</sup> in ‘the perplexity of the living.’<sup>x</sup> With the traumas of Canada fresh in mind, she lashes out at the traditional patriarchal dominance of male-oriented environment of India where, in spite of being highly educated, women succumb to their passive roles in a stressed environment.

The existence in servility of women even in affluent families, disgusts Bharati Mukherjee and she finds the freedom of the West friendlier to the restraining and exasperating existence in India and that sets the demand for re-historicize oneself who . Uprooted in Montreal, the racist attitude of the Western world seems less dreadful, as she undergoes a drastic change, with violent attack on her sensibilities. Worried about the hostilities in Montreal and being attacked in the subways seems a lesser evil than the evil rampant in India. Mukherjee’s novels are virtual discourse on the same transnational lives and bi or multicultural sub-stream of America dealing with nostalgia and disillusionment. She writes on the dialectic of immigrations, expatriation, exile and repatriation through dislocation and resettlement.

*The Tiger's Daughter* depicts nostalgia and disillusionment both, she also has created here the myth of the nomad adrift in favour of an affirmation of belonging and the theme of the successful conquest of the New World. Mukherjee, however, rejects the nostalgia of this early book. The immigrant of the Middleman, she describes as a pioneer; and the eponymous character of Jasmine, 'a conqueror, a minor hero.'<sup>xi</sup> In rejecting the experience of expatriation figured in *The Tiger's Daughter* she takes on the myth of the immigrant in its place. In reaction to the literature and myth of expatriation Mukherjee endorses the literature of immigration, representing the neo-national spirit of America.

She figures this transformation in geographic terms. In Canada she was a psychological expatriate, in the United States an immigrant and citizen. Not undergoing this conversion from expatriation to immigration is in Mukherjee's eyes, evidence of nostalgia and a refusal to participate in the New World and embrace its citizenship and nationalism.<sup>xii</sup> She claims and treats Rushdie among a number of writers who choose 'exile' and dispossession rather than psychological citizenship.<sup>xiii</sup>

Brewster remarks that 'Mukherjee's conversion narrative invests India with the status of the 'old world' which is repressive and where opportunities are closed by caste, gender, or family. The process of abandoning the old order is explored most fully in the novel, *The Tiger's Daughter* and her first non-fiction co-authored with Clark Blaise, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*.

In the U.S.A. Bharati Mukherjee sees herself as an immigrant writer. In her works which were either completed or fully written, she explores the immigrant sensibility, and dislocation recognizing its duality and flexible identity besides taking into cognizance alternate realities. In the Introduction to *Darkness* she lays bare her position and creative priorities- 'The transformation as writer and as resident of the new world, occurred with the act of immigration to the U.S.A [...] For me it is movement away from the aloofness of expatriation, to the exuberance of immigration.'<sup>xiv</sup>

The movement from expatriation to immigrating is also reflected in the choice of the writers who shaped Mukherjee's creative sensibility. After outgrowing and discarding the posture of an expatriate she rejected Naipaul as a model and chose Bernard Malamud whose central concern was life of minorities and its agonies. Though partially influenced by Isaac Babel, Conrad and Chekhov, she followed Malamud-- as his writings instilled unusual confidence in her:

Like Malamud, I write about a minority community which escapes the ghetto, adapts itself to the patterns of the dominant American culture. Like Malamud's my work seems to find quite naturally a moral centre. Isaac Babel is another author who is a literary ancestor for me. I also feel a kinship with Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov. But Malamud most of all speaks to me as a writer and I admire his work a great deal. Immersing myself in his work gave me the self-confidence to write about my own community.<sup>xv</sup>

Malamud taught Mukherjee how to overcome being viewed as the 'Other' in a diagonally different cultural milieu. While Malamud's characters are from poor classes, humble shoe-makers, tailors and bakers, Mukherjee's immigrants are doctors, university professors, businessmen and women married to upwardly mobile professionals. Both address themselves to the diasporic experience of cultural alienation. Entering Malamud's literary space enabled Mukherjee to move her fiction from the constantly shifting margin to the unstable and shifting centre which has no fixed place.

Thus, Mukherjee's approach to life and its problems is deeply moored in her Indian upbringing. Maya Manju Sharma refers to this aspect of her creative personality- 'In her fiction Mukherjee

handles Western themes and settings as well as characters who are westernized or bicultural. Yet she is forced to admit that the very structure of her imagination is essentially Hindu, and essentially moral.<sup>xvi</sup> Despite being grouped with other Indian writers albeit those who largely foreground their diasporic status, Bharati Mukherjee has asserted Americanness- 'I left India by choice to settle in the U.S.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 at Ellis Island.'<sup>xvii</sup>

Thus, the textual mapping of the colonial encounter concludes with the new 'migrant' novel, a form which is explicit in its commitment to hybridity. Such trans-cultural narrative possesses a serious challenge to the cultural stability of the metropolitan centers. In its transformational quality, Diaspora is typically a site of hybridity which questions fixed identities based on mono-centric essentialisms. Specifically in the context of Caribbean Diaspora, Stuart Hall talks about 'imaginative rediscovery' of 'Caribbeanness.'<sup>xviii</sup> Furthermore, Hall explicitly connects this imaginative effort with the concept of hybridity:

The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of "identity" which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>xix</sup>

One of the major concepts of Diaspora is the celebrative expression of a sense of this twilight zone of *in-betweenness*, which includes connotations of hybridity, *heteroglossia*, mimicry,<sup>xx</sup> acculturation, cultural shock, and loss of identity as nationals. In the essay "Mimicry and Man" Bhabha quotes Lacan while unfolding mimicry as 'an ironic compromise'<sup>xxi</sup> and a 'desire for a reformed, recognizable Other'<sup>xxii</sup>. 'The effect of mimicry is camouflage.... It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled-exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.'<sup>xxiii</sup>

This speckled and 'mottled' environment of the polyphonic transnational character is accompanied by enduring ordeal of dislocations and slippages. Thus, trauma is another key concept of Diaspora. The metaphor of trauma draws attention to the ways that extremes of violence break bodies and minds, leaving indelible marks even after healing and recovery. The whole process involves splitting and slippages. But the notion of trauma has been extended to cover a vast array of situations of extremity and equally varied individual and collective responses. Trauma can be seen at once as a sociopolitical event, a psychological process, a physical and emotional experience and a narrative theme in explanations of individual trauma and social suffering. Bharati Mukherjee asserts that in the process of splitting and cultural dislocation man seems to lose his meaning and purpose in life. In the process of migration, the immigrants can neither adopt alien culture nor can leave their culture of 'home' and finally a new hybrid culture comes to flourish. To quote Bill Ashcroft:

Post colonial culture is inevitably a hybrid phenomenon involving a dialectical relationship between the grafted European culture 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' subversion of them.<sup>xxiv</sup>

The general tendency of the people in the diasporic space is to be centric to primary identities – religious, ethnic, territorial and national. Interestingly, all are involved with the same hybrid phenomena before the reconstruction. Most of Mukherjee's novels deal with the question of such

hybridity and the crisis of such identities along with transmission of ethnic traits. She takes in account the borderline condition of cultural translation in the postcolonial location of past present and future. In Mukherjee's fictions the two geographical entities, the home and location thus support, and to an extent reflect each other.

In her narratives she takes in account of the spatial and locational subjectivity related to their homeland. Her characters experience the cultural inanity and the social displacement which are expressed in mixed identity codes. Such concept of diasporic space as theoretical construct, evolving out of the practical journey from alienation to acceptance seeks to project and map out the space of different culture and postcolonial heterogeneity. This space of diasporic experience is potent to become the pulsating contemporary parameter, offering various other new scopes of negotiations on the programmed location of culture.

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- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>xxiv</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*, London: Rutledge, 1989.p.195.

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