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Re-conceiving the identity in a translational space: A study of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction

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Abstract

The varied migratory movements attempt to give some indication of the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of immigration. While 'immigrant' defines a location, a physical movement and a frontward attitude, 'exile' indicates an unavoidable isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. The word exile evokes multiple meanings covering a variety of relationships with the mother-country such as alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context the migratory movements are governed by the movement of indentured labour and of the trading communities; the same is also governed by the pursuit of higher standard of living, opportunities for work, education and corporate service assignments among others. In the trans-cultural global context a migrant is an important postcolonial subject. In her novels, Mukherjee has designed a new diasporic narrative to define the American system which is shaped by original, foreign and occult and reinvents a semiotics of American citizenship and ethnicity with defiant challenge to traditional ways of conceiving the national.

Keywords: Migratory movements, ideologies, immigration, location, exile, isolation, nostalgic anchoring in the past, alienation, ethnicity.

Introduction

The word 'Diaspora' is literally a 'scattering', carrying within it the ambiguous status of being both an ambassador and a refugee. The requirements of the two roles are different. While one requires the projection of one's culture and the ability to enhance its understanding, the other seeks refuge and protection and relates more positively to the host culture. Further categories emerge through the use of such words as immigrant, exile and refugee. The varied migratory movements attempt to give some indication of the ideologies, choices, reasons and compulsions which may have governed the act of immigration. While 'immigrant' defines a location, a physical movement and a frontward attitude, 'exile' indicates an unavoidable isolation and a nostalgic anchoring in the past. The word exile evokes multiple meanings covering a variety of relationships with the mother-country such as alienation, forced exile, self-imposed exile, political exile and so on. In the Indian context the migratory movements are governed by the movement of indentured labour and of the trading communities; the same is also governed by the pursuit of higher standard of living, opportunities for work, education and corporate service assignments among others. In the trans-cultural global context a migrant is an important postcolonial subject. Rushdie remarks: [M]igrant is perhaps, the central or defining figure of the twentieth century [...] A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption: he loses his place, he enters in an alien language, and he finds himself surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are very unlike, and sometimes even offensive to, his own. And this is what makes migrants such important figures: because roots, language and social norms have been three of the most important parts of the definition of what it is to be a human being. The migrant, denied all three, is obliged to find new ways of describing himself, new ways of being human [1].

The whole process of trans-migration results in multiple homes and diasporic spaces and a migrant, in the process of new ways of being human, suffers dislocations and acquire a non-exclusionary hybridized global identity. Yet, this multiplicity of 'homes' does not bridge the gap between 'home' – the culture of origin; and the 'world' – the culture of adoption. In such precincts of history, the boundaries have an uncanny pattern of persisting in thousand

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different ways, and are very often conflictual. Homi Bhabha shifts this conflict to a theoretical gain; he transforms the diasporic 'scattering' to 'gathering,'^[2] and thus shifts the focus from nationhood to culture and from historicity to temporality. Globalisation has produced a new structure and outline of migration and provoked conflicting structures and responses worldwide. The seemingly homogenizing effect of globalization cannot hide the different responses it has prompted in the different regions within its reach. As Avtar Brah observes, 'Home is a mythic space of desire in the diasporic imagination [...] It is a place of no-return even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'^[3] Identity politics driven by migration, Diaspora and exile have in turn mapped literary imagination and produced literary writings of distinct characteristics.

Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* states: 'Migrants must, of necessity, make a new imaginative relationship with the world, because of the loss of familiar habitats'^[4]. This change of habitat often results in translational representation of Diaspora and displacement, both spatial and psychological. However, their diasporic condition, their sense of exile and alienation, their metaphoric existence and their efforts to seek replenishment by making symbolic returns to their origins bind all this writing into a unity. Rushdie comments that migration 'offers us one of the richest metaphors of our age'^[5]. He adds, 'Migrants-borne-across humans-are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor, is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples'^[6].

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. 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'^[7].

Diasporic consciousness locates itself squarely in the realm of the hybrid where one can see 'Bones splitting breaking beneath the awful pressure of the crowd'^[8]. It creates a new space and a new location of culture 'that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy'^[9]. According to Victor J. Ramraj:

The attachment to the ancestral homeland varies considerably among the diasporans and is inversely proportional to the degree individuals and the communities are induced to or are willing to assimilate or integrate with their new environment, or remain wedded to ancestral customs, traditions, languages and religions. Those tending towards assimilation are less concerned with sustaining ancestral ties than with coming to terms with their new environment and acquiring a new identity. Writers like Bharati Mukherjee expect the assimilation to be mutual^[10].

Wife, in its depiction of the central character's alienation and depression, also articulates a bleak vision of an immigrant woman's failure to assimilate into Western culture. *Wife* and the later novel, *Jasmine* can be said to represent each other's opposite. Mukherjee distinguishes quite sharply between her

Canadian and American phases and quite sharply shapes and prescribes a reading position for her fiction. She states that 'by the time I came to write *The Middleman*, I was exhilarated, my vision was more optimistic and characterizes the collection as her 'tribute to America'^[11]. She presents Jasmine as 'born again American'^[12] providing an optimistic vision of the New World.

The process of abandoning the old order is explored most fully in the novel *The Tiger's Daughter* and her first non-fiction book co-authored with Clark Blaise, *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. The conversion then rests upon the discarding or abandoning of the old order and the embracing of the new: 'I was (bicultural) when I wrote the *Tiger's Daughter*; now I am no longer so and America is more real to me than India [...] I realized I was no longer an expatriate but an immigrant that my life was more here [...] I need to belong. America matters to me. It is not that India failed me- rather America transformed me'^[13].

In her novels, Mukherjee has designed a new diasporic narrative to define the American system which is shaped by original, foreign and occult and reinvents a semiotics of American citizenship and ethnicity with defiant challenge to traditional ways of conceiving the national. The new ethnicity has emerged 'with a dimension of doubling; a spatialization of the subject [...] the 'third dimension' of the mimetic frame or visual image of identity'^[14]. She re-conceives identity in a translational space and recuperates the experience of diverse constituencies into a new hegemony, a neo-nationalism. Here one can locate an inexorable move towards a new form of socio-cultural order without the nostalgia of reconstituting a home in the new location of inter-textuality and synthesis.

In the field of literature, diasporic writing emerges from the margins, contested boundaries and the contradictions in the overlapping territories. The post-nation migrants negotiate to occupy a new meaning while illustrating the identity construction in the new global context.

What distinguishes Diaspora from some other types of travel is its centripetal dimension. It does not only mean that people are dispersed and dissolved in different places it also leads to the possibilities of congregation in other places, forming new communities. Scattering, as Homi K. Bhabha notes, becomes a gathering:

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gathering of exiles and émigrés and refugees [...] Also the gathering of the people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status—the genealogy of that lonely figure that John Berger named the seventh man^[15].

In such gatherings, new allegiances are forged that displace and supplant former obligations of cultural necessities. The newly emerged imagined communities not just simply replace the old ones but form space in-between different identifications, a hybrid space, accommodating often the problematic components of culture.

Bhabha insists that all cultural systems are constructed in the 'Third space of enunciation'^[16]. He further says:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness' that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past,

refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The 'past-present' becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living^[17].

The cultural identity that emerges out of necessity and nostalgia in this ambivalent space, makes any claim to a pure culture untenable; dislocations are inevitable and even necessary and the resettlement of the 'borderline community of migration'^[18] ultimately turns out to be a search for new location of culture. Mukherjee depicts this diasporic truth in her analysis of the textual politics resulting from the colonial encounter. Mukherjee's position as a writer of Diaspora has aptly been described by Kellie Holzer:

Mukherjee has explored the multiple self-reinventions possible as a result of continual displacement. Her major themes include immigration to the West, psychological transformation and the violence that accompanies it, women's perspective and search for autonomy, and a hybrid worldview that relies on her Hindu roots, Americanization, and, increasingly, on transnationalism^[19].

Faced with the dilemma of her own cultural location in the new nation, Mukherjee observes:

We immigrants have fascinating tales to relate. Many of us lived in newly independent or emerging countries which are plagued by civil and religious conflicts. We have experienced rapid changes in the history of the nations in which we lived. When we uproot ourselves from those countries and come here, either by choice or out of necessity, we suddenly must absorb two hundred years American history and learn to adapt to American society. Our lives are remarkable, often heroic^[20].

Mukherjee is therefore, very forthright in the matter of scripting a more inclusive history of dislocation and is very clear about the role of a creative writer from the Third World in reshaping its new demographic map. Specifically in the context of Caribbean Diaspora, Stuart Hall talks about 'imaginative rediscovery' of 'Caribbeanness'^[21]. 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^[22].

Different responses to migration, whether as an essential and inevitable phenomenon of globalization or a transformative consequence of political persecution, ethnic cleansing or natural disasters are articulated in literature produced in places where diasporic communities exist. The interaction between the 'host' and 'immigrant' cultures, complicated by translation, asks new questions of identity politics and the issues involved.

It also problematizes conventional notions of location and ethnicities, bringing to the fore an urgent need to re-explore the ways in which aesthetics, politics and ethics interconnect, and out of this intersection cultural differences delineate patterns of such intercutting subjectivities. Being an amalgamation of diverse cultural materials, backgrounds, and identities, it nevertheless differs from other types of heterogeneity, implying at the same time a markedly asymmetrical relationship between the different elements of a given fusion. It also asks new questions of how culture and

literature interact, more particularly, how the overlapping of old and new patterns of voluntary and forced migration is re-mapping cultural and identity politics.

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