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The trans-cultural trajectory of the immigrants and the neurotic compulsion of indulging in abnormal acts: Bharati Mukherjee's depiction diasporic woman in wife

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Abstract

The term diaspora, first used for the Jewish migration from its homeland, is now applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. It refers to the work of exiles and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential and psychological levels. The shifting designation of 'home' and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the impossibility of going back are perennial themes in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions. She is the voice of the immigrants from all over the world, writing about them in tradition of immigrant experience rather than expatriation and nostalgia. To avoid 'otherness' she strongly opposes hyphenation in her national identity as Indo-American or Asian-American writer. Hence it is necessary to interrogate the nature of her work. It is also to examine the strategies she adopts in order to negotiate the boundaries. Kellie Holzer remarks- 'Mukherjee considers herself a pioneer, an immigrant writer; she adamantly does not identify as "hyphenated" American or a diasporic, or postcolonial writer. Instead of hyphenation, exilic or mere immigrant status, she focuses on the immigrants' true search for empowerment, dignity, their identity and a successful survival in the settled country. Her staying on in America and cherishing the 'melting pot' metaphor of America made her a writer of immigrant literature and a writer of Indian diaspora literature.

Keywords: unsettlement, dislocation, unsettlement, homelessness, expatriation, nostalgia, hyphenation, immigrants

Introduction

The term *diaspora*, first used for the Jewish migration from its homeland, is now applied as a metaphoric designation for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. It refers to the work of exiles and expatriates and all those who have experienced unsettlement and dislocation at the political, existential and psychological levels. From the original particular reference to the scattering of Greek, Jewish, and Armenian people, diaspora has become a narrative to signify more metaphorical journeys of people from their initial homes to other places of dwelling and working, resulting in a divisible nature of identity. Said reflects on such cultural map of imperialism:

It is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order[...]their condition articulates the tensions, irresolution, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism^[1].

In the era of globalisation diaspora is a general component of contemporary world. This diasporic identity is often constructed through a negotiation with the politics of the country of settlement as well as a recasting of their relationship to the past. As the exemplary condition of late modernity, Diasporas do not tend to substantiate domination or territoriality as a prerequisite of nationhood. They inhabit and occupy the liminal spaces of the nation where the most creative interaction take place and where essentialist notions of ethnicity and

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belonging are distanced as against inherent specificities. The liminal and marginal status of diasporic writers comes through, for example, in the terms that are used to describe this extremely heterogeneous group such as expatriate, exile, diasporic, immigrant, migrant, hyphenated, dislocated and the NRI. The Indian diaspora as mentioned earlier, has been formed by a scattering of population and not, in the Jewish sense, an exodus of population at a particular point of time. This sporadic migration traces a steady pattern if a larger view is taken over a period of time from the indentured labourers of the past to the IT technocrats of the present day. 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 ^[2].' It creates a new space and a new location of culture 'that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy ^[3].' 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 ^[4].

Caught between two worlds, the expatriate negotiates a new space, a new location. Likewise, the expatriate writer negotiates new literary spaces. Therefore, an anxious sense of dislocation is characteristic of expatriate writings. The shifting designation of 'home' and the attendant anxieties about homelessness and the impossibility of going back are perennial themes in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions. She is the voice of the immigrants from all over the world, writing about them in tradition of immigrant experience rather than expatriation and nostalgia. To avoid 'otherness' she strongly opposes hyphenation in her national identity as Indo-American or Asian-American writer. Hence it is necessary to interrogate the nature of her work. It is also to examine the strategies she adopts in order to negotiate the boundaries. Kellie Holzer remarks- 'Mukherjee considers herself a pioneer, an immigrant writer; she adamantly does not identify as "hyphenated" American or a diasporic, or postcolonial writer. To be a "post-colonial" is to identify India as home, a move analogous to passport classifications and a proposition entirely too limiting for Mukherjee ^[5].'

Instead of hyphenation, exilic or mere immigrant status, she focuses on the immigrants' true search for empowerment, dignity, their identity and a successful survival in the settled country. Her staying on in America and cherishing the 'melting pot' metaphor of America made her a writer of immigrant literature and a writer of Indian diaspora literature. Fakrul Alam justifiably comments 'She doesn't discard her Indianness, though she rejects hyphenated identity as Indo-American. She focuses on Indian women and their struggle ^[6].'

Like the novelist herself, her characters too straddle two worlds and are pulled in two directions between home and location, confused in the delusion of alternative realities. In *Jasmine* the protagonist's migrancy is located in cross-cultural context where dislocation and rearrangement of

existence finally lead to assimilation of the contraries. *Jasmine* is perhaps the most representative of Mukherjee's novels, and in contrast to *Wife* the most accomplished work about being an exile. It was published nine years after Mukherjee's move to America in 1980, in the wake of her literary success as the winner of the 1988 National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), and one year after "Give Us Your Maximalists!" It marks a swerve in emphasis in Mukherjee's writing, in her treatment of the subject of immigration, assimilation and femininity, in comparison to earlier works like *Wife* (1975) and the even earlier *The Tiger's Daughter* (1971).

The narrative structure of *Jasmine* is non linear, and tracks the protagonist's memory from the narrative present of her life in Baden, Iowa, as the wife of an agricultural banker, back through her earlier existences as an Indian peasant girl, her advent as a young and vulnerable immigrant in America, and her transitional period headed towards assimilative merge. Each of these stages is represented by a name change. She starts out as 'Jyoti' of Hasnapur, is rechristened 'Jasmine' upon her arrival in America, is nicknamed 'Jase' by her employers in New York, and finally becomes the all-American 'Jane' in Iowa. The story depicts the ambivalence of self-fashioning by participating in the transgressive process of decolonizing the self. To quote Pushpa N. Parekh:

The memory of Jasmine's personal history and environment shapes and directs the reception of her present experiences and context and is often countered by the accruing of new memories of newer experiences. This double perspective of the shifts in time and space and their impact on the psyche of the immigrant woman can be explored through the tonal shifts with which the Jasmine-Jane protagonist concretizes her emotional an intellectual reality. Fear, anger, pain, bitterness, confusion, silence, irony, humour, as well as pathos underline her observations as she discovers for herself the undefined median between the preservation of the old World and the assimilation in to the new one ^[7].

The novel takes off with the astrologer's prediction about Jyoti's widowhood and exile. The seer foretells her future, pronouncing 'my widowhood and exile [...] I was nothing, a speck in the solar system [...] I was helpless, doomed.' ^[8] Jasmine tries to go against the wheel of fortune repositioning the stars and she reaches out for a metamorphosis and transformation from a docile and meek Indian wife to an assertive independent woman who makes a journey of self-discovery from a feudal condition to her migrancy and exile experiencing dislocations. The hard reality of her imperiled identity is negotiated by violence in the geometry of her entropic universe. After her marriage with Prakash her husband gives her a new name Jasmine. Her renaming is a sort of rechristening and a displacement from earlier role playing, similar to Dimple, addressed as 'Nandini' by her mother-in-law in *Wife*:

He wanted to break down the Jyoti as I'd been in Hasnapur and make me a new kind of city woman. To break off the past, he gave me a new name; Jasmine....Jyoti, Jasmine: I shuttled between identities ^[9].

From the beginning, Jyoti rebels against her cultural inscriptions. Jasmine frantically moves to break the shackle of a jinxed future showing all signs of postcolonial dread of

secondariness and tries to move away from the past at all costs, including the cost of a stable identity. Mukherjee is plainly disinterested in the preservation of cultures, the hallowing of tradition, obligations to the past; at least, she is not interested in the nostalgic aspects of such preservation. Rather, her current work forwards a distinction between exilic and immigrant *others* for whom attachments to personal and cultural pasts leave little room for peripheral significance. Such characters undergo personal transformation in their movements from culture to culture, changes that Mukherjee exemplifies in the strongest terms.

Mukherjee does not show any inertia or emotional weakness for the past, although she is never unrealistic to drop nostalgia as outdated software. Her works embrace and accept fission that must accompany cross-cultural revision and personal change. Jasmine says: 'There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake ourselves. We murder who we were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams.'^[10] It is the willingness of Jasmine to murder her past self that enables her to actively advance into unknown but promising futures. The futures she propel herself toward, and even help to shape, are not guaranteed to be successful, but do have the potential for personal, material and spiritual success.

Thus Mukherjee's woman escapes from a childhood and adolescence, circumscribed by a feudal economy in Hasnapur to become Jasmine. The transformational myth becomes operative on her and we are shown how the trauma of displacement generates a feverish anxiety on her. The story of *Jasmine* is the story of a personality in motion, in quest of identity. The novel seems to define immigration as part of the disintegration of a homogeneous culture and resultant dislocations which are to be negotiated in a new geographical and economic compulsion. In the language of Samir Dayal 'The syntax of her self-articulation is a parable for social transformation of the Indian postcolonial'^[11].

Wife demonstrates what devastation a hostile culture can cause in a sensitive individual. Dimple suffers from the neurotic compulsion of indulging in abnormal acts in order to conceal her own sense of intrinsic weakness and failure. Her women characters are tantalized by the possibility of passion, which they mistake for love and self-expression. America which appears to be a free land is in fact the enigma of existence of all Indian women. Here chances of survival depends on an immigrant's agility to embrace mutation before reaching out for an alternative space, translated transmitted and transmuted through violence and splitting.

Violence is the key word in Mukherjee's fiction, and the psychic violence that she thinks necessary for the transformation of character, is often emphasized by an accompanying physical conflict of some sort. For her 'murder evolves into an acceptable signifier for discarding nostalgia and starting over: It is neither the end nor even merely the means to an end it is a beginning.'^[12] Dimple lacks adaptability, mutative readiness as well as cultural grit of resistance. She is inert and caught in a suffocating inertia, dislodged from all valid space of survival strategies. Mukherjee says:

The kinds of women who attract me, who intrigue me, are those who are adaptable, we've all been trained to please, trained to be adaptable as wives and that adaptability is working to the women's advantage when we come over as immigrant. For an Indian woman to

learn to drive, put on pants, cash cheques, is a big leap. They are exhilarated by that change^[13].

With such exhilaration come fears, doubts, mistakes and violence, both psychological and physical. More and more through Mukherjee's novels, as the anxiety and uncertainties get overhauled in the frequency of action and activity, what is glossed over in terms of psychological torment is compressed into desperate violent acts. This enhances the stress of the aggressive moments when decisions and choices are made, and Mukherjee considers it a necessary experience for the remaking and replacement of the self in the changed domain of new immigrant aesthetic. When asked 'Do you see immigrant as an experience of reincarnation?' Mukherjee has answered, 'Absolutely! I have been murdered and reborn many more times, until she needs to murder in order to be reborn'^[14].

The new births that are engendered by some violent fracturing of norms are accompanied by great pain, but Dimple is helplessly caught in the gripping quest for a new female American identity. That she finds another way out of her miserably married state is a comment on her new life as an immigrant woman in America, which moulds her personality into the shape of her future. It is possible, the murder itself may be ambiguous in many ways, but it is symbolic of Dimple's assertion of power at a critical juncture. It has freed her from becoming a prisoner of ghetto, unbearable to her free-thinking mind, and she descends into depression, madness and murder:

If "too American" signifies a politics and an ideology that affirms selfhood in particular, then it is quite certainly that Dimple is in the process of becoming. The violent transformations of her psyche are more dangerous because of these shrill protestations. There is simultaneous fracturing and evolving of identity going on here, in terms of both ethnicity and gender which is true of the experience of multiculturalism^[15].

Jasbir Jain, however, does not agree that *Wife* deals with cultural conflict. Dimple has never been able to relate herself to her tradition, or to understand it. All her actions are geared towards the future and this bespeaks of the main problem, the utter rootlessness of her life. For Dimple, there seems to be no way out; the distance covered cannot be retraced. She is an immigrant, both in place and mind, hers is the 'foreignness of spirit'^[16]. Bharati Mukherjee does say 'There isn't a role model for the Jasmies' or the Dimples. They have to invent roles, survive and revise as best as they can'^[17]. While they survive and revise, they remain for a while suspended between two worlds, until they have to choose between them in order to find a space to inhabit. The New World, in which they must now 'intervene' and 'negotiate,' holds promise of a new selfhood as well as new battles against marginalization. Self-assertion, however, is a power that these women are only beginning to enjoy. The problem with the diasporic male is however different.

Amit's ideology and life-style confirm that he is a thoroughbred 'expatriate.' His mission in the United States is to earn money. He does not feel comfortable in the company of American guests in parties. So he often bounces back to the company of Meena and Jyoti Sen. But, Amit has a few strategies to survive in an alien culture. He has mastered the popular American catch phrases suggestive of challenge, crisis management and confrontation which help him to

communicate with Americans very effectively. However, he does not show interest either in imbibing American culture or in contributing to American culture.

His dream is to return to India and settle down in a posh locality in Calcutta. Well steeped in 'expatriate' sensibility, he easily slips into the company of Indian 'expatriates' in Queens. From day one, Amit is worried about his job. He is quite oblivious of the culture in which he lives. His mindset has been well moulded by other 'expatriates' in Queens. Amit does not express any wonder or surprise at the enormity of America. He does not know how to interrogate or negotiate with American reality for cultural space.

Like any other Indian 'expatriate', he lives on the fringes of American society. Naturally, his experience in America is quite limited. It does not broaden his perspective and therefore it does not open up new avenues for him. He acts and reacts like an average 'expatriate.' He does not want to send Dimple for a job in Khanna's Emporium. As a male chauvinist, Amit snubs Dimple every time he gets an opportunity. Amit silences her whenever she expresses her curiosity about Americans. That is mainly responsible for turning Dimple inward.

Though Indian in origins, Ina, the prototypical American, does not typify blending or hybridity. Her Americanization is no longer a process but a practiced, negotiated and accepted fact. Her action is of pure balance between herself and America. Ina's theory replaces one with the other. According to Ina, total severance from the past is a precondition to assume an American identity. In the trans-cultural trajectory of the immigrants, the transformation is very often multidirectional. The immigrant's entry in to a foreign land is not to cause disruption; it is in another way to redefine one's nationness. She is terribly tossed in the conjunction of inclusion and exclusion, honour and humiliation. In a coercive condition of her being, her very existence is challenged. She does not know where she stands between respect and repudiation

And this process is not transgressive or corruptive; it implies post nation fluidity and change. As a new entrant from another culture, the conspicuous immigrant lands in to a conflictual space. This creates an existential stress highlighting the fissures in the process of assimilation. The patriarchy that Ina and Dimple experience is not simply that of the industrialized first world, they must also grapple with the ways in which they have been named by their own specific cultural context. Thus Mukherjee demonstrates the fact that women's subject positions are varied and multi-layered. So the Western feminist rhetoric cannot supply role models for 'Dimples' and 'Jasmines'.

Transnationalism in Bharati Mukherjee's fictions depicts an essential relationship that exists between herself as a migrant subject, and the nationality or the location of her native culture and destination countries- first Canada, and finally America. This intersection of culture creates in due course the new location of culture and identity. Problem of identity is due to the forces of globalization which include transnational exodus of the immigrants and exiles. The result is either cultural mosaic or melting pot and in such global village the sense of a homogenous self-contained character is something that is hardly possible. In such postcolonial condition a person on the alien shore is composed of all sorts of conflicting essentials.

However, in Rushdie's texts, such mongrelization of identity has an explicit historical perspective. It is related to the condition of postcoloniality, a condition where pure space

and essential identities have ceased to exist, and where the diasporic subject is inevitably contaminated by diverse cultural practices. For example, the postcolonial 'immigrant other' is a potent figure of 'in-betweenness' contaminated by history. Likewise the (un) homed 'immigrant other' is fragmented by time, which challenges and disturbs the Western Enlightenment's belief in stable heroic and unified identities approaching relentlessly towards some identifiable Goal. The whole discursive process undergoes distinct phases of contamination and then mongrelization. Comparing the mongrel nature of post-mutation state he notes:

We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork and as a result [...] we are now partly of the West our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools [...] Having been borne across the world, we are translated men ^[18].

It is these mongrel identities and 'painfully divided selves,' ^[19] operating within the matrix of an equally hybridized space and plural social practices that Mukherjee's novels have been set. In her novels Mukherjee explores the fragmented plural and partial nature of post-colonial identities, the inter-subjective and inter-cultural experiences, hybridity and hyphenation. She deals with the fluid diasporic identities and the conscious negotiation and contestation before the cultural translation. Mukherjee interrogates the myth of fixed and unchanging identities in expatriation and forced exile and the dilemma in immigrant experience while negotiating multiple challenges on one's identity and dislocation that one suffers. Tara likewise, unveils many aspects of the immigrant experience of the novelist in America. The experience of her characters in their homeland and abroad echoes her own concerns, her beliefs and faith. Simultaneously they also reflect her growing and transforming identity as an American.

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