



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2015; 1(7): 307-309
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 08-04-2015
Accepted: 12-05-2015

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The theory of Diaspora in Bharati Mukherjee's novels: Interrogating the mirror image in global and reconstructive perspective

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Abstract

Mukherjee's critical discourse on Diaspora is a highly vibrant and is marked by violent expression of this ambivalence of the split self. It is not a mere transference of textual spaces. The writer creates a counter-discourse that is at once geographical, spatial and differential. The subjective centre is contested in a critical juncture when the immigrant, rooted in a nostalgic and remembered experience. Mukherjee's postmodern concern for diasporic parenthesis of location, dislocation and re-location is largely propelled by postcolonial environment of mass migration and disjuncture. In a condition of global anthropological necessity no human society has been able to avoid either immigration or dislocation and consequently none has been able to avoid multiculturalism. Since the late 19th century and most of the 20th century, voluntary migrants to the metropolitan cities along with the second and third generations of the early migrants have formed a part of the existing diaspora. This global movement has led to the emergence of a new narration of travel, dislocation, displacement and uprooting. In her fiction Mukherjee shows how the individual responds to multiculturalism in various ways through withdrawal or involvement, submission or assimilation or through short circuiting memory or by hardening of identity constructs. Mukherjee's expatriates are largely the creatures of loss, living a life of cultural depletion and estrangement, dwindling in the polyphony of global identity. Mukherjee precisely details the insurgencies and manipulations of these borderline subjectivities between 'melting pot' and 'cultural mosaic.'

Keywords: ambivalence, split self, counter-discourse, spatial difference, disjuncture, mass migration, displacement, multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

Mukherjee's critical discourse on Diaspora is a highly vibrant and is marked by violent expression of this ambivalence of the split self. It is not a mere transference of textual spaces. The writer creates a counter-discourse that is at once geographical, spatial and differential. The subjective centre is contested in a critical juncture when the immigrant, rooted in a nostalgic and remembered experience, stands at the moment of interrogating the mirror image, in *global and reconstructive*^[1] perspectives. Diasporic subjects are physically caught between two worlds and as such they are 'transitional-being[s]' or 'liminal *persona[e]*'^[2]. They are all moving subjectivities and respond ambivalently to their antithetical culture after dislocations and re-location.

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'^[3] 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^[4].

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Mukherjee's postmodern concern for diasporic parenthesis of location, dislocation and re-location is largely propelled by postcolonial environment of mass migration and disjuncture. In a condition of global anthropological necessity no human society has been able to avoid either immigration or dislocation and consequently none has been able to avoid multiculturalism. Since the late 19th century and most of the 20th century, voluntary migrants to the metropolitan cities along with the second and third generations of the early migrants have formed a part of the existing diaspora. This global movement has led to the emergence of a new narration of travel, dislocation, displacement and uprooting. The loss of the original homeland has inspired visions of 'imaginary homelands' ^[5], which in themselves constitute a longed-for utopia. 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' ^[6] 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' ^[7]. 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' ^[8].

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 ^[9], 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' ^[10] and a 'desire for a reformed, recognizable other' ^[11]: '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' ^[12]. This dappled and 'mottled' background of the polyphonic transnational identity is accompanied by lingering trauma 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. 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.

In her narratives, new themes, new anxieties and searches have been expressed that reflect the traumas and fusions of the displaced as they strive to recover a sense of self or construct a new selfhood. In her fiction Mukherjee shows how the individual responds to multiculturalism in various ways through withdrawal or involvement, submission or assimilation or through short circuiting memory or by hardening of identity constructs. Mukherjee's expatriates are largely the creatures of loss, living a life of cultural depletion and estrangement, dwindling in the polyphony of global identity. Mukherjee precisely details the insurgencies and manipulations of these borderline subjectivities between 'melting pot' and 'cultural mosaic.'

Assimilative 'melting pot' unlike the 'cultural mosaic' may have the capacity both to dismantle the traditional concepts

of a static, exclusivist identity as is evident in Mukherjee's trajectory of thought. The fluidity of the chaotic condition transforms the alienation and displacement into productive ambivalence. Mukherjee is not in favour of the Western hegemonic aesthetics. She instead legitimizes the aesthetics of dislocation redefining the so called absolute and exclusive state of being. She probably insists on assimilation as a discursive strategy that compensates the alienation and dislocation by the adoption of a hybrid space that leaves problematized the meaning of 'home' itself. Time, space, history and identity are sites which are visited through the concerns of the past that has undergone suppression, atrocities and multiple injuries and has transformed all perceptions of their mutating world.

Bharati Mukherjee admits of being subjected to racial discrimination in Canada. While her husband's creative acumen was recognized, her potentialities went ignored and unmarked. Canada's hostility to Indians and the non-recognition of her writing in Canada are the twin recurring themes which appear with almost obsessive regularity in Mukherjee's early works. She experienced herself as a psychological expatriate in Canada and clung to her ethnic identity — 'I remember how bracing it was to cloak myself in my own Brahminical elegance' ^[13]. She became a Civil Rights activist in Canada and wrote about the crippling effect of racism on the individuals. Both in the personal and political writings and her Canadian fiction, her experience of expatriation is poignantly manifested. Her fourteen-year-stay in Canada has stressed her spirit to the breaking point. Her essay *Invisible Woman* is a blistering reflection on those years. She writes: 'Many including myself left (Canada) unable to keep our twin halves together' ^[14].

Viewing herself as a writer with two novels to her credit, Bharati Mukherjee identified V.S. Naipaul as her model in 1977. In *Days and Nights in Calcutta*, she says-'In myself I detect a pale and immature reflection of Naipaul; it is he who has written most movingly about the pain and absurdity of art and exile, of 'third world art' and exile among the former colonizers; the tolerant incomprehension of hosts, the absolute impossibility of ever having a home, a 'desh' ^[15].

Identification with Naipaul at this stage evidences that Mukherjee treated herself as an expatriate writer on the basis of her first two novels. The process of change from expatriation to immigration got off during Mukherjee's stay in India in 1973-74. She recalls, 'The year in India had forced me to view myself more as an immigrant than an exile' ^[16]. The realization of fluid identities and alternate realities too could be traced to this sojourn in India as she further observes- '[I]n India, different perceptions of reality converge without embarrassing anyone. My year in India had shown me that I did not need to discard my Western education in order to retrieve the dim shape of my Indian one' ^[17].

The years between *The Tiger's Daughter*, and *Darkness* mark a change in the inner world of Bharati Mukherjee. In 1985, distancing herself from the earlier stance of an expatriate, she emphatically voices the futility of such a stance. In the Introduction to *Darkness*, she says that until the spring of 1984, 'I had thought of myself, in spite of a white husband and two assimilated sons as an expatriate' ^[18]. She defines expatriates as conscious knower of their fates and immigrants — in particular to Canada — as lost souls subdued and pathetic. In respect of the stylistic devices of an expatriate writer, she referred to irony, so tellingly employed

by Naipaul:

Like V.S. Naipaul, in whom I imagined a model, I tried to explore state-of-the-art expatriation. Like Naipaul, I used a mordant and self-protective irony in describing my character's pain. Irony promised both detachment from, and superiority over, those well-bred post-colonials much like myself, adrift in the new world, wondering if they would ever belong ^[19].

She thus reveals that she is freed of the impediments of expatriate nostalgia by the stringencies of life in the New World. The stories collected in *Darkness* mark a distinct departure in that Mukherjee is no longer an aloof expatriate writer. Now onwards, she regards expatriation in diasporic experience as a restrictive and self-defeating attitude in a writer.

Anne Brewster has termed Bharati Mukherjee's discourses on diaspora as *neo-nationalism* ^[20]. He is critical of Mukherjee's assimilation theory and fusionism and related issues. According to Brewster, 'Bharati Mukherjee's discourse on migrants in the U.S. positions them not on the margin of contemporary American culture but, rather, as exemplars of a hegemonic nationalism' ^[21]. She characterizes her writing about migrants not as oppositional to mainstream America but as representing the voice of the New America. Brewster argues that Mukherjee enunciates 'a neo-nationalism' and 'Her own literary success places her firmly within the American literary canon and this success reflects the receptivity of certain constituencies to a reinvention and revitalization of American nationalism' ^[22].

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