



Recasting new hybrid (sub)-culture: Bharati Mukherjee's depiction of female subjectivity in diasporic condition

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Abstract

Expatriate writing in its theory and practice, is the work of the exile who has experienced unsettlement and dislocations at the existential, political and metaphysical levels in a hostile condition. With this experience, the travelling identities unsettle the philosophical and aesthetic systems. The phenomenon of exile has emerged in modern times due to uneven development within capitalism and due to the movement forced by colonial powers. The uneven development has led to unprecedented migration of the Asians and Africans to the West. The imposed and indirectly hegemonizing shift from territories has occurred within Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and also from these continents to the West. This territorial shift has produced a new (un)-homed person whose mind works in a fluid paradigm for definition of national and cultural identity. In her phenomenal fictions Mukherjee visualizes how the immigrant subjectivity has lost the culture that used to unify the unanticipated and startling events of history leaving a negotiated space for recasting the comforting and stable perspectives, generating a new hybrid (sub)-culture. In this process the dislocations have led to some ambivalent and intersecting visions. The hybridity experienced is not just philosophical; it is also local and existential. The migrant existential subject position, that is determinant of this specific aesthetics, is faced with two centers; the external colonial or modernist, and the internal or national, filtering into a personal and essential identity. The chief feature of the poetics of exile is the trial during which it deals with these centres between essence and metaphysics in the changed global condition.

Keywords: *dislocation, trauma, subaltern, culture*

Bharati Mukherjee is a postmodern English diaspora novelist and nonfiction writer. She was born on 27 July 1940, in a Bengali Brahmin family of Calcutta. She spent her first eight years as a member of a large extended family. After Independence, she lived with her parents and two sisters in London for about three years. In 1951 the family returned to Calcutta. Bharati Mukherjee did

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her B.A (Honours) in English at the University of Calcutta in 1959 and got her M.A. degree in English from the University of Baroda in 1961. Her father encouraged her to join the Creative Writing Programme in the United States. She went to the University of Iowa where she obtained an MFA in creative writing in 1963 and a Ph.D in 1969.

At the University of Iowa Mukherjee met Clark Blaise, the Canadian writer and married him in September 1963. In 1966 the couple moved to Canada and lived there as Canadian citizen till 1980. Her fourteen years in Canada were some of the hardest of her life, as she found herself discriminated as a member of visible minority. Although those years were challenging, she was able to write her first two novels-*The Tiger's Daughter* (1971) and *Wife* (1975). Finally fed up with Canada, she and her family moved to the United States in 1980, where she was sworn in as a permanent US resident. From 1966 to 1980 her position was that of an expatriate. She was writing in the manner of V.S.Naipaul, but then her literary models came to be like Bernard Malamud, Henry Roth and Isaac Babel. Because her displacement was not forced, it was her own choice for career that she had rejected her hyphenated identity. To avoid 'otherness' she strongly opposes hyphenation in her national identity as Indo-American or Asian-American writer. She questions, 'why it is that hyphenation is imposed only on non-white Americans? Rejecting hyphenation is my refusal to categorize the cultural landscape in to a centre and its peripheries; it is to demand that the American nation delivered the promises of its dream.'ⁱ

Mukherjee is the voice of the immigrants from all over the world, writing about them in the tradition of immigrant writing rather than that of expatriation and nostalgia. Hence it is necessary to interrogate the nature of her work and 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.'ⁱⁱ

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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.’ⁱⁱⁱ 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.’^{iv} 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.’^v In her novels, Bharati Mukherjee has dealt with such moving metaphors of culture- their displacement, dislocation, mutation and translation.

Bharati Mukherjee traces her descent from the early immigrants arriving at Ellis Island to those who arrive legally and succeed in living the American Dream. The status of Bharati Mukherjee as an immigrant writer in the United States has been confirmed by the publication of a critical anthology on her writing. In his Introduction, the editor Emmanuel S. Nelson asserts that the publication:

[I]s also an unequivocal acknowledgement of Mukherjee’s emergence as a major American writer with an international audience. Her works, collectively, provide us with a poignant chronicle of her own search for home, wholeness, and stability. Her greatness however, derives from her discovery in our immigrant lives of an occasion for art of epic dimensions.^{vi}

Mukherjee has declared that she is for mutual assimilation and acculturation of the dominant and immigrant communities, seeing the process as ‘a two-way metamorphosis’^{vii} and advocating what she calls ‘mongrelization’ of people and cultures.^{viii} Diasporan Indian critic R.Radhakrishnan

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analyses the notions of the uprooted immigrant subjectivity. He considers the significant disconnection between first generation immigrants and their successors, and the anguish experienced by them in not belonging either to India or the United States. He problematizes the concept of ‘authenticity and the role it occupies in the diasporan imaginary.’^{ix} Radhakrishnan warns against the capacity of capitalism to produce a phenomenology of the present that reduces the diasporic individual to forget the past and bracket the future. He considers the options open to first generation immigrants in their quest towards an ‘authentic’ identity. He emphasizes the need to make ‘a distinction between information about the knowledge of India and an emotional investment in India.’^x

In her first phase of literary career, as an expatriate writer, Bharati Mukherjee tries to find her identity in her Indian heritage, stemming from her nostalgia for home. The very first novel, *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1971), is the exposure of her own married life and her return from America with her husband. The heroine’s return to India exposes Mukherjee’s personal difficulties as she feels alienated in Calcutta and does not seem to be a part of her Bengali family. Her second novel *Wife* (1975) is also a novel writing about expatriation. It deals with the psychological problem of an immigrant woman. Here, Dimple the woman protagonist migrates from India to the USA with her husband, Amit Basu, who doesn’t satisfy her dreamy desires. She has drawn her husband’s image from TV ads and magazines, and not finding the silver-screen personalities in him, she turns neurotic and murders her own husband.

Jasmine, Bharati Mukherjee’s *magnum opus* came out in 1989. The protagonist Jasmine in contrast to Dimple, is a widow who gets uprooted and re-rooted severally in the New World and establishes a new identity in her new location. It is the story of Jyoti who becomes Jasmine, then Jase and finally Jane. There is transformation of an individual, her displacement, dislocation and finally, quest for identity. In fact, it is the phase of Mukherjee’s transformation from expatriation to immigration. Jasmine is an illegal immigrant in the USA, where she is raped by captain Half Face who has brought her. So, to avenge his act of violence, she murders him, changes her name and

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identities. As a caretaker of Mr. Taylor's baby, she is Jase, with Bud in Iowa, she is Jane. She changes her identities several times over to survive in the new country.

Bharati Mukherjee's other fictional works are *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* (1997), *Desirable Daughters* (2002), *The Tree Bride* (2004) and *The New Miss India* (2011). Her *Darkness* (1985), and *The Middleman and other stories* (1988) are her collection of short stories. In these writings also, there is a search for her roots and characters taking on transnational identities in the processes of globalization.

Mukherjee's works inhabit and occupy the liminal spaces of the nation where the most creative interaction takes place and where essentialist notions of ethnicity and belonging are distanced as against inherent specificities. 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.'^{xi} It creates a new space and a new location of culture 'that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.'^{xii} 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.^{xiii}

Their quest for identity leads individuals to several dislocations, subsequently emboldening the empowered, emancipated woman on the one hand, and confused undecided characters who resort to violence and mutation in order to self-assert in the new geo-political locale and acquire a new sexual orientation. The new breed of immigrants negotiates the conflicting components of their ethnicity and Americanism. They emerge triumphant, and some characters dwindling between two

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cultures become nomadic, decentered, and contrapuntal, and subsequently split personalities, and reside in the self-made ghettos negotiating multiple dislocations.

Notes

ⁱBharati Mukherjee. "American Dreamer," *Mother Jones Magazine* (Jan/Feb.1997):1-2, http://www.mojones.com/mother_jones/JF97/mukherjee.html

ⁱⁱ. Kellie Holzer. "Bharati Mukherjee." *South Asian Novelists in English*, Ed. Jaina C. Sanga. Greenwood: London, 2005.p.170.

ⁱⁱⁱSalman Rushdie. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Vintage, 2010.p. 125.

^{iv}*Ibid.*, pp.278.

^v *Ibid.*, pp.278-279.

^{vi}Emmanuel S. Nelson. "Introduction." *Bharati Mukherjee: Critical Perspective*.Ed. Emmanuel Nelson. New York: Garland, 1993.p. xvii.

^{vii} Patricia Holt, 'Mukherjee's vision of America', *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, 17 Feb. 1991, p.2 in Victor J Ramraj. "Diaspora and Multiculturalism." *op.cit.*, p. 228.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix}R. Radhakrishnan. "Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora" in Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur eds.*Theorising Diaspora*.Malden N.A: Blackwell, 2003: p.124.

^x*Ibid.*, 125.

^{xi}Salman Rushdie. *Midnight's Children*. (London: Picador, 1982), p.533.qtd. in *The Location of Culture*, *op.cit.*, p.xxiv.

^{xii} Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. NY: Routledge, 1994. p.5.

^{xiii} Victor J Ramraj. "Diaspora and Multiculturalism." *New National and Post-colonial Literatures* .Ed. Bruce King, New York: OUP, 2000. p.217.

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