



BHARATI MUKHERJEE'S INTERPRETATION OF FEMALE DIASPORA: DISLOCATION, RELOCATION AND TRANSLATION

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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 phenomenal novels 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 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 different ways, and are very often conflictual.

Key Words: dislocation, location, translation, trauma, subaltern, migration, displacement, culture, immigrant, margins & boundary.

In a diasporic condition, cultures go across boundaries, transgress lines and take root after multiple dislocations, and the transplanted subjects feel nostalgia, or experience amnesia amid contestation and ethnic disavowal under specific conditions. Such migration has resulted in most cases politically and socially mobilizing category of nationalism in a diasporic space. 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.

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[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 different ways, and are very often conflictual. Homi Bhabha shifts this conflict to a theoretical gain; he transforms the diasporic 'scattering' to 'gathering,'ⁱⁱ and thus shifts the focus from nationhood to culture and from historicity to temporality. Such hybridity cannot be contained either in hierarchical or binary structures. Others, like Rushdie turns to India, to mythologize the history. Naipaul transforms his sensibility to a perpetual homelessness, while Bissoondath rejecting the homogenization of ethnicity, projects immigration as essentially about renewal and about change. It is unjust, he points out, to expect – that the communities from which the immigrants emerge be required to stand still in time. To do so is 'to legitimize marginalization: it is to turn ethnic communities into museums of exoticism.'ⁱⁱⁱ

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 centers, between essence and metaphysics in the changed global condition.

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 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.

Bharati Mukherjee has explored many facets of diasporic consciousness and immigrant experience of dislocations, ruptures and relocation of the migrant women in her fictions. She has dealt with the ambivalence of their psychic and spatial identity and the trauma of dislocations at multiple levels. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore Mukherjee has tried to evolve her own strand of *feminism* grounded in the truth of compulsory displacement that they recurrently undergo. Indian expatriate writers do not write from all exclusive foreignness of their identity but their writing reflects the perspective of someone caught between two cultures. Bharati Mukherjee has been especially attentive to the changes taking place in the control mechanism of south Asian women in the New World, their otherness and alienation in 'the larger flow of a transnational history.'^{iv}

Mukherjee consciously avoids glorification of the native country, she also doesn't allow herself to demean or lower the adopted country or the center of the new location although there are criticism on her bicultural perception. Mukherjee has emerged with a postmodern counter narrative of assimilative and celebratory American citizenship. This new perspective preserves essential Indianness to be exotic but merge gleefully into American materialism. From this category of experience Mukherjee wishes to carve her own exclusiveness within the broader genre of American Literature.

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. 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.'^v

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.^{vi}

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

She insists on her separation from Indian writers of English in particular the prominent names such as Anita Desai or R.K.Narayan. She equally refuses an affinity with V.S.Naipaul’s expatriate fiction.^x She has thus created an altogether new perspective to define the immigrant sensibilities. The age-old instinct of being accepted in the new environment while still retaining the old ideas and culture, leads to a life of duality, a split personality, which seeks to emerge as a survivor in the New World but preventing the normative point of unproblematic identity. They need to counter not only the entire self; they need to fight the colonial sensibilities after the interstice between dislocation and relocation in order to submerge into the ‘American Dream:’

My rejection of hyphenation has been misrepresented as race treachery by some India born academics on the U.S. campuses who have appointed themselves guardians of the ‘purity’ of ethnic cultures. Many of them though they reside permanently in the United States and participate in its economy, consistently denounce American ideals and institutions. They direct their rage at me because by becoming a U.S. citizen and exercising my voting rights, I have invested in the present and not the past: because I have committed myself to shape the future of my adopted homeland; and because I celebrate racial and cultural mongrelization.^{xi}

Migrancy and dislocation, either consensual or conflictual, is a global and trans-cultural necessity. Mukherjee’s protagonists are all sensitive and are differently trained in the new ethnic imagination. They are tossed in an environment of ambivalence regarding their identity, racism, sexism and other social oppression. They negotiate displacement and face the multicultural reality in the process of cultural differentiation and assimilation. The multiculturalism ethos with which they are confronted leads to the struggle for a new life and a near break with the past. They are shown at an emotional transit point and from their dual and bicultural perception they attempt to measure the disjuncture and persecutory paranoia. In the USA Mukherjee explores the immigrant sensibility, recognizing its duality and fluid identity and acknowledges its realities. According to Malashri Lal:

Undoubtedly, Mukherjee focuses upon the immigrants in America, that energetic, volatile community to which this gifted writer lends her voice and consequently appropriates ‘another’ America. But the immigrants, like her, have a pre-history. Their cultural imperatives, interacting with the unknown focus of the new world, create a drama of co-options and collaborations which the story teller records.^{xii}

Out of her own several transitions as a diasporic narrator, Bharati Mukherjee has evolved a credo for the new immigrant voices, which she calls *Maximalism*. This is in contrast to the stagnant ‘Minimalist fiction’ of mainstream. Her attack is leveled at writers as Updike and Cheever. According to Mukherjee, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner gained some kind of international readership. The later writers pretended to speak for America but used only limited categories of subjects like Vietnam, dead-end jobs and midlife crises. In her own language:

I can imagine a poster over the United States court house: Welcome Maximalist. Hello Expansionists. The New America I know and have been living in for the last seven years is a world, by definition of doubles [...] they have all shed past lives and languages, and have travelled half the world in every direction to come here and begin again [...] what they have assimilated in 30 years has taken the West 10 times that number of years to create. Time travel is a reality-I have seen it in my own life. Bionic Men and Women are living among us.^{xiii}

‘Minimalism’ according to Mukherjee, ignored the major changes America was passing through. She locates the immigrants who are confident sophisticated, poised, who will not melt into an American mainstream but visibly expand the margins of what one may call ‘the American Experience’. These new Americans are neither nostalgic for their personal past nor afraid of the unfamiliar present. Their main strategy is adaptation without surrender.

Bharati Mukherjee is her own theorist and exemplar since her novels illustrate the credo of immigrant writing as a ‘Maximalist’ act. She emphatically asserts her American citizenship. She has her characteristic way

of defining her Indian heritage and affiliations through several assertions. Mukherjee has expressed the reality of being located in a particular culture, geographically and ideologically separate from her chosen home and citizenship and has thus problematised her own identity. This aspect of her own cultural exclusivity is very strongly expressed while criticizing the Americans. Mukherjee says in *Desirable Daughters* (2002): 'They have no idea of the wealth I came from.'^{xiv} Again, Mukherjee's powerful assertion that she is an American writer in the tradition of other American authors 'whose ancestors arrived at Ellis Island'^{xv} doesn't in any way, demean her original home just for celebrating her American citizenship.

With all such cultural problematic and diasporic ambivalence, Mukherjee has long used fiction to explore issues of identity and culture, often through displaced characters – Indian coming to the West or Westerns heading to Asia. The tremendous difference between two ways to life leads a person to a feeling of depression, frustration and delirium where 'Psyche and Society mirror each other.'^{xvi} In the modalities of translational selection and differentiation women have to assimilate the alien culture and accept the changed identity.

She is an outsider in a no man's land. She recreates herself into a new personality and forms emotional ties with the place where she lives and 'behave in accordance with a neurotic orientation.'^{xvii} Mukherjee's novels and short stories express the same dislocations and the neurosis in their wandering impulse and their deliberate search for materially better life. They migrate to the West and consequently face tension of adaptation and assimilation. She depicts the cross-cultural conflicts and shows how her heroines turn febrile and *phantasmic*^{xviii} to take control over their destinies.

Mukherjee's writing largely reflects her personal experience of such febrile subjectivity in crossing cultural boundaries. In novels such as *Jasmine*, *The Tiger's Daughter*, *Wife* and *The Desirable Daughters*, as well as in her award winning short stories, Indian born Mukherjee adds to her character's multicultural background a delicate undercurrent of translational upsurge which sometimes expresses itself through violence and existential disorderliness. Mukherjee's women characters such as Tara Cartwright, Dimple, Jasmine or Tara Chatterjee, all quest for a location and show a subaltern dread and anxiety to be visible. They are not concentric to adopt racial stereotype at the cost of identity. They accept a mutative change through displacement and replacement of culture.

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 a new location of culture. 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, she murders him, changes her name and identities. As a caretaker of Mr. Taylor's baby she is Jase, with Bud in Iowa, she is Jane. She has tried new identities 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 works also she shows the search for her roots and resultant transnational identities in the process of globalization.

The women characters of Bharati Mukherjee belong to different cultural perspectives and feel marginalized in new culture in their new interstitial role. Their aesthetic image discloses varied gender and ethnic presence in the transitional world. Bharati Mukherjee herself had to face this as an expatriate in Canada. Considered outsider due to her skin color and facing the problem of racism and non acceptance as a writer, made her caustic. The same conditions are faced by three of her characters- Tara, Jasmine and Dimple in the initial stages of expatriation in the New World. All of them face the trauma of dislocation and marginalization. Standing at the historical and discursive boundaries they make efforts to stand the 'trial of cultural translation.'^{xix} Apart from the above three women, Tara Chatterjee of *Desirable Daughters* outgrows further from cultural translation to a reconstituted root search in the Tree-Bride's narrative.

Their quest for identity leads them 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 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 cultures- nomadic, decentered, and contrapuntal, subsequently become split personalities, and reside in the self-made ghettos negotiating multiple dislocations.

Each of the characters of Bharati Mukherjee re-incarnates itself into new self as a strategy to pave a path to a future, which provides freedom of expression, be it in their sensuality or be it the voicing of their suppressed selves. Jasmine savors the freedom of the New World, renouncing the old tradition which is not difficult, though the self-recrimination haunts her, before the shelving of the old self. She epitomizes the postcolonial migration and the profound process of the redefinition of self, beyond the known boundaries of nation race and culture. Bhabha describes:

[T]he very act of going *beyond* –are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the ‘present’ which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced. The imaginary of spatial distance – to live somehow beyond the border of our times - throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. The present can no longer be simply envisaged as break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence.^{xx}

Establishing a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’^{xxi} Walter Benjamin gives voice to the dissident history of the postcolonial migrants who celebrate fragmentation and give a new language to the cultural and political Diaspora, their displacement and search for new centers, new locations. This very process of (re)location is deconstructive as it gives rise to a counter-narrative, challenging the Western ethnocentrism and cultural mono-polarity. The disenfranchised ‘other’ is an emergent translated resistance who seek empowerment by overcoming the trauma of dislocations. And the total process gives rise to a new fable of immigrant’s history men and women alike.

In Mukherjee’s diasporic envisioning the manifestation of self-empowerment is in the hands of the women. Her female protagonists experience the self-realization of their ‘Power,’ either forced through violence like rape as in *Jasmine* and *The Tiger’s Daughter* or the internalized conflicts leading to murdering the symbol of oppression as in *Wife*. Compared to this manifestation of female power, the women of the West lament the status of passivity and powerlessness. In spite of the freedom of expression and liberation of sexual liaisons, their position is that of a second citizen. ‘Now, woman has always been man’s dependent, if not his slave, the sexes have never shared the world in equality.’^{xxii} Even then the West is liberating in comparison to the obscurities and vapidness of Indian ethos which discourage woman emancipation.

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