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Conflict and Stress in Diasporic Condition: Bharati Mukherjee's Female Characters

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Abstract:

The problem of origin and Diaspora arise with particular conflict and stress between internationalism and nationalism; the relationship between place and identity; and the ways cultures and literatures interact. In the process of diasporic cross-over new patterns of mobility are being drawn on the familiar landscape of migration and exilic exclusions. In the context of diaspora there is a process of structuring the shared identities in the making of a new subjectivity. Instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic and polyphonic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self. In Jasmine the immigrant soul experiences a confusing and twisted conglomerate of identity and does not quite want to quit. Instead, she embraces it for radical self-transformation. The metamorphoses are gradual, generating an appetite and energy. Jasmine constantly finds that she is never at home, that she is a perpetual vagabond and a perplexed nomad. She finds her differential sense about her own identity. Her compulsive obsession on her past has a rekindling effect. She cannot shrug off it all –her home and location. She survives in a series of split and discontinuous moments. Her Indianness gradually reduces to sign of signification only. Dimple, the woman protagonist in Wife, stands at the transit point of culture, confused between her Indianness and the transplantation; she is skeptical about traditional values and vapid social norms but she is unable to negotiate the need of the crude transnational norms which demand both exclusion and merger. Her inability to deal with the pangs of displacement results in violence, both psychic and physical. In India, unhappy wives commit suicide; Dimple asserts herself by committing murder, not suicide.

Keywords: *transit, culture, transnational existence, exclusion, merger, transformation, transmutation, identity, slippages, dislocation.*

Questions of origin and Diaspora come up with particular surface-tensions between internationalism and nationalism; the relationship between place and identity; and the ways cultures and literatures interact. In the process of diasporic cross-over new patterns of mobility are being drawn on the familiar landscape of migration and exilic exclusions. In the context of diaspora there is a process of structuring the shared identities in the making of a new subjectivity. Instead of being seen as fixed, becomes a dynamic and polyphonic construction that adjusts continually to the changes experienced within and surrounding the self. This is the same kind of assertiveness that is present in Brah's use of the term 'homing desire,'¹ simultaneously expressing a desire to construct a home in the new diasporic location and leaving the whole

concept of 'home' open to analysis and criticism. In the era of globalisation this process of a 'homing diaspora' does not imply a nostalgic desire for 'roots,' nor 'is it the same as the desire for a 'homeland'; it is realized instead as a construction of '*multi-locationality* within and across territorial, cultural and psychic.

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.*'ⁱⁱ

The whole process of trans-migration results in stress in this origin creating multiple homes and diasporic spaces. 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,'ⁱⁱⁱ 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.'^{iv}

Abdul Jan Mohammed describes the expatriate's position as being one of either 'the specular border intellectual'^v or the 'syncretic border intellectual.'^{vi} He seems to say that one finds oneself unable or unwilling to be 'at home in these societies.'^{vii} Such intellectuals are engaged in defining other possibilities and in their position and functioning as exiles they are likely to be critical of the new culture. Citing the example of Edward Said, Jan Mohammed comments, 'Quite often his position, which allows a kind of distance from Western literature and discursive practices, permits Said a secular role — that is he is able to provide in his writing a set of mirrors allowing Western cultures to see their own structures and functions.'^{viii}

In *Jasmine* the immigrant soul experiences a confusing and twisted conglomerate of identity and does not quite want to quit. Instead, she embraces it for radical self-transformation. The metamorphoses are gradual, generating an appetite and energy. Jasmine constantly finds that she is never at home, that she is a perpetual vagabond and a perplexed nomad. She finds her

differential sense about her own identity. Her compulsive obsession on her past has a rekindling effect. She cannot shrug off it all –her home and location. She survives in a series of split and discontinuous moments. Her Indianness gradually reduces to sign of signification only.

The psychic split in Jasmine does not terminate in the decision of accepting or not accepting the tradition; now the stress is on the excitement for life and a concern for a woman's right to live and to relocate oneself. The narrative treatment is an attempt to de-familiarize the traditionally acknowledged representation of an Indian woman. The collapse of the heroine's submission to convention aims to establish her independence and emancipation.

The protagonist of the novel thus, is both a victim and an agent in postcolonial context. Her disjunctions in a location of adversative unipolarity is synaptic and in between there is the diasporic ambivalence and trauma of displacement. The novel is an account of Jasmine's coming into her own as a woman destroying selves and superstructures in order to realize the potential self. She thus transforms herself with increasing rapidity. Jasmine's journey of self-discovery takes her from the feudal condition to her migrancy and exile in the West. This change is marked by chaos and dislocations. In fact Jasmine experiences one chaos after another. Jasmine's violent substitution of self can be taken as a liberating move, chaotic and discontinuous but emancipatory.

In the novel Mukherjee has given her heroine a society that was so repressive, chaotic and traditional, so caste bound *genderist* that she could discard it easily.^{ix} The novelist therefore sets out to find metaphors and symbolic location for the re-incarnation of Jasmine and shows how Indianness in a woman gets horrible transformation as she moves towards Americanization and further away from her native resources. *Jasmine* is a story of the trauma of circumstantial subjugation experienced by a woman in home and expatriation. It too, is a story of a semi-feudal rural India where a mother has to strangle her baby girl just because she will be a 'dowryless' girl in the time of her marriage and also of an astrologer who menacingly sets the destiny of the others.

The transmigration of Jasmine is anti-centric and not simply peripheral. There is a definite emancipatory appetite in *Jasmine*. She develops an urgent assimilative urge and internalizes deterrents of human survival and with a radical defiance swerves far away from indigenous femininity to a greater self choice. She has learnt the art of living in becoming an ever-changing animation to slough off her formal identities and superstructure, acculturating to a new location and retaining her original self that is built at an impetus of the astrologer's prediction. She needs to resort to violent self- emancipation and substitute her temporal trauma to a substantive attitudinal change in view of falsifying the astrologer's prediction. The astrologer's prediction is a symbolic prompter of such violent denial of feudal periphery which demands disjunction and search for relocation.

Here one can see a surge for emancipation, a desire to break the lock and boundaries. Here is a feminine soul not cowed down by tradition and superstition, prefers day light natural darkness and natural cloud to cheat fate. In killing the Half Face she experiences an epistemic violence that is also a life-affirming transformation. Although she is deeply ambivalent, she recapitulates the Eastern figuration of self as nothing. In the process of rapid exfoliation the negativity is coupled powerfully and culminates with the positive image of a destroyer. During her tenure as Duff's and Budd's care giver she is creative. Jasmine is a destroyer but, like Kali, she is also ultimately a preserver, and an agent of the life-force.^x

Jyoti also comes to realize early in her life that she was 'a survivor, a fighter and adapter.'^{xi} She knows that her mother's desperate bid to strangle her as an infant failed. It is not that her mother did not want a life for her; rather she was afraid that as the fifth daughter of their impoverished family Jyoti was ordained to be dowry-less bride and she therefore wanted to spare her the humiliation. Jyoti's grandmother, disturbed that the teenage Jyoti wants to study and not marry, tells her that 'Individual effort counts for nothing,'^{xii} but Jyoti would not be coaxed into abandoning her dreams of getting a better life through education. She believes that her aim was to break the shackles of tradition and rise above her surroundings. Jasmine rejects despair and cynicism and believes that 'she can move on and make a life for herself.'^{xiii}

Her husband Prakash Vihj is her key mover encouraging her to identify herself as a victim of a feudal power structure, so as to unfetter herself from it. Jasmine's more or less conscious resistance against this feudal structure is homologous with the struggle of postcolonial subject formation. As the simple village girl Jyoti may have harbored the illusion of fixed identity, but as a woman she learns to resist a hardened stereotype of the feudal Indian wife challenges the West's mechanism to territorialize her, to render familiar her strangeness.

Jasmine is face to face with culture's twin blow, fragmentation and assimilation and also the third impact, hybridity. Even after fragmentation and dislocations, she looks forward, not to the present reality, for she feels that reinvention of self, not nostalgia, is her strength. Transformation and compliance are the key to survival, and that the thriving immigrant has the instinct of reinventing oneself in recurrence to adjust with the postcolonial exilic reality. Thus, in the flurry of change and action, conflict and confusion there is the whole nucleus of cross-cultural reality. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha is categorical:

To grasp the ambivalence of hybridity, it must be distinguished from an inversion that would suggest that the originary is, really, only an 'effect' Hybridity has no such perspective of depth or truth to provide: it is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures, or the two scenes of the book, in a dialectical play of 'recognition.' The displacement from symbol to sign creates a crisis for any

concept of authority based on a system of recognition: colonial specularity, doubly inscribed, does not produce a mirror where the self apprehends itself; it is always the split screen of the self and it's doubling, the hybrid.^{xiv}

Dimple, the woman protagonist in *Wife*, stands at the transit point of culture, confused between her Indianness and the transplantation; she is skeptical about traditional values and vapid social norms but she is unable to negotiate the need of the crude transnational norms which demand both exclusion and merger. Her inability to deal with the pangs of displacement results in violence, both psychic and physical. In India, unhappy wives commit suicide; Dimple asserts herself by committing murder, not suicide.

In Indian context, a woman is better suited for adapting herself to another culture, because she has to undergo a process of 'othering' in her own culture. She has experiences marginalization and discrimination right from her birth. Moreover, she experiences the process of 'dislocation' and relocation in her own culture as a woman. She is displaced at every stage of her life. Initially, she is housed in her parents' place; after marriage, she is relocated in her in-laws' place; in old age she is re-housed in her children's place.

Despite such expected built-in adaptability in Dimple's self, and exposure to dislocation in her life in India, she fumbles a lot in the United States and turns violent. The madness is both psychic and cultural, being put in a new location in the New World. She is trapped in a space where, on the one hand, she needs to repress the traces of her Indianness if she hopes to fit in the location, and on the other hand, she has to negotiate the wrecked promises of a liberated world which however discards her. In Dimple her madness, her inability to translate is coterminous with her expatriate status. The novelist locates Dimple perfectly in an American situation and describes her 'unspeakable failings.'^{xv}

She has expected pain when she had come to America, had told herself that pain was part of any new beginning, and in the sweet structures of that new life had allotted pain a special place. But she had not expected her mind to be strained like this, beyond endurance. She had not anticipated inertia, exhaustion, endless indecisiveness.^{xvi}

For Mukherjee, a stronger assimilative culture requires the transparent assimilation of cross-cultural components. In her novels, Mukherjee seems to assert the need to go to the history of America which had multicultural and multi-racial origin. She positions her protagonists in the same multicultural mosaic of America at the backdrop of liberal American multicultural rhetoric, revealing its space with gaps and fissures.

Dimple, the protagonist of Mukherjee's *Wife*, migrates to the cultural mosaic of the United States with her husband Amit, an engineer from IIT, Kharagpur. While Amit is engrossed in amassing money like every other Indian expatriate in the novel, Dimple is in pursuit of

happiness and independence. Since Dimple enters the United States abruptly, without any mental preparation, the shock is too much for her. She is far from the unitary sign of traditional human culture and familiar signification. She has difficulties in understanding the cultural codes of the country, its representations of difference and apparently narcissistic dynamics. She does not want to turn to the Indian 'expatriates' living in the United States for emotional support as she understands the inadequacies of their style of life.

Dimple is caught in inertia between the stages of expatriation and immigration. She is also torn between the traditional role model of a submissive self-effacing Indian wife and the new role model of an assertive independent wife offered by the West. But at a particular stage, she establishes contact with the host culture. She builds bridges between the Indian expatriates and the host culture. But, in the absence of a good facilitator and adequate knowledge to help her encounter the alien reality, she has access only to the televised version of the alternate reality. She eventually succumbs to social/cultural pressures and ultimately becomes a disillusioned expatriate.

She endeavored to submerge deep into the chaotic psyche of those immigrants who have been surviving in the conflict of traditional Indian values; intrinsic in their personality. She also indicates their fascinating allurements for Western mode of living that they have chosen out of their professional compulsions or for their urge to attain a greater freedom in moderate, liberal and dynamic society of America, disciplined and disseminated at the same time. She has ordered her novels within the frame of the didactics of immigrants and the aesthetics of dislocation. The thematic centers of Bharati Mukherjee's fiction are more or less aimed at this ambivalence. Her focus remains on the predicament of migrant entities, colliding self with the other, and the possibilities for absorption and rejection in the New World. To quote Bhabha:

The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism, for instance, do not simply or singly refer to a 'person', or a dialectical power struggle between self and other, or a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures. Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the *reference* of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something *different*—a mutation, a hybrid.^{xvii}

Mukherjee's women characters are not free from the memory of silent repression of the native tradition or the same 'split screen' of self. An important change of perspective occurs when they land in an alien hub. They suffer displacement, both physical and psychological and the ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses creates confusion and chaos when instantly infused by the splinters of another location of culture. Jasmine does not lack intellectual,

emotional and psychological depth but initially it seems that she is more on superficial aping of the Western behavior pattern than self assertion of any meaning. Before she undergoes mutation after several dislocations, she suffers from some erratic panting for space, the identity of which was not known to her. In the portrayal of the transformation of a docile Indian wife into an aggressive Indo-American woman there is clear suggestion of a diasporic predicament-the relocation of culture.

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^{vii}*Ibid.*

^{viii}*Ibid.*,p. 105.

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^{xvi}*Ibid.*

^{xvii}*Ibid.*,p.159.