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Polyphonic Transnational Identity Accompanied by Lingering Trauma of Dislocations and Slippages: a Study of Bharati Mukherjee's Fiction

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Abstract:

In the field of literature, diasporic writing emerges from the margins, contested boundaries and the contradictions in the overlapping territories. The post-nation migrants negotiate to occupy a new meaning while illustrating the identity construction in the new global context. 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. 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. Blaise observes in *Days and Nights* that Human relationships are fragile in America. In India the human relations are stable to a large extent, and the stability of these relationships in India is due to the traditional virtues of our culture. In her novels Mukherjee locates the immigrant women protagonists in several 'inside/outside' and 'threshold' positions.

Keywords: dislocation, location, trauma, subaltern, migration, displacement, culture, immigrant, margins, boundary.

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 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 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. (Holzer 170)

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, (Bhabha 121) 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' (Bhabha 121) and a 'desire for a reformed, recognizable Other' (Bhabha 121) '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.' (Bhabha 121) This background of the polyphonic transnational identity is accompanied by lingering trauma of dislocations and slippages. 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:

[I]t 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. (Said, Imperialism 402)

In the field of literature, diasporic writing emerges from the margins, contested boundaries and the contradictions in the overlapping territories. The post-nation migrants negotiate to occupy a new meaning while illustrating the identity construction in the new global

context. 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.

Diaspora, according to Bhabha produces incompatible systems of signification. Meaning is produced in the interstice that introduces creative invention into existence. (Bhabha 12) Bhabha insists that all cultural systems are constructed in the ‘Third space of enunciation.’ (Bhabha 54) He further says:

The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present. It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living. (Bhabha 10)

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. Blaise observes in *Days and Nights* that Human relationships are fragile in America. In India the human relations are stable to a large extent, and the stability of these relationships in India is due to the traditional virtues of our culture. In her novels Mukherjee locates the immigrant women protagonists in several ‘inside/outside’ and ‘threshold’ positions. Lal remarks further-‘Immigration is a subject freshly supplied by Mukherjee to the repertoire of modern American fiction.’ (Lal 57) All her major immigrant women protagonists such as Tara, Dimple, Jasmine and Tara Bhattacharjee of *Desirable Daughters* are challenged by unresolved contradiction of culture and negotiate multiple dislocations in the shifting dynamics of transnational globality.

Dimple in *Wife* aborts her child in order to gain freedom in the New World yet does not have the grit to find a foothold for herself because she is always insecure and dependent on Amit Basu to offer freedom on the platter of marriage in terms of material emancipation. Naturally, the husband becomes an adversary when he is not as per her fantasies. Adverse conditions faced by the female characters in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee are faced with clarity in case of Hannah Easton, with ferocity by Devi and resilience to survive by Jasmine and someone like Dimple ends up in a bloody quagmire and all of them face dislocation and mutation.

Mukherjee's women are constantly combating the unresolved contradiction between culture and location in order to exist in a world of 'othernesses.' This *othernesses* could not be limited to new culture, but in the process of the assimilation of the contraries, they negotiate disjunctions and ruptures. A silent rupture exists within their identity mechanics. It is persistently the negotiation of self and other or the mutation outside that unleashes a split space which consists in the free play of dislocations and politics of polarity. Bhabha quotes W.Harris in *The Location of Culture* :

I have been stressing a certain void or misgiving attending every assimilation of contraries-I have been stressing this in order to expose what seems to me a fantastic mythological congruence of elements..... And if indeed therefore any real sense is to be made of material change it can only occur with an acceptance of a concurrent void and with a willingness to descend into that void wherein, as it were, one may begin to come into confrontation with a spectre of invocation whose freedom to participate in an alien territory and wilderness has become a necessity for one's reason or salvation. (Bhabha 56)

For Dimple the 'other' is American society and the wilderness is its cultural ethos. America and its open society expedite the hunger in Dimple to refashion her self. Her act in killing Amit is more like relinquishing her 'self' out of her failure to understand the dreadful presence of a concurrent void. Her reincarnation, in a way, exonerates herself from the bondage of repression, the 'self' blending with the 'other.' Tara in *The Tiger's Daughter* to Devi in *Leave It to Me*, Dimple Dasgupta in *Wife* to Hannah Easton in *The Holder of the World* are or seem to be, a part of the author's early and late life, first as an expatriate and then as an immigrant. Jasmine, of *Jasmine* in her assimilative urge, situates herself in the adjoining juncture rather than the transit of culture in the postcolonial 'performance of transcription' (Bhabha 331) through splitting and disjuncture. Tara of *Desirable Daughters* stands in a transgressive moment of history, but hers is a route in to the root. Her split and unhinged identity seeks repossession of balance; she is not a wandering nomad from within nor has salvaged herself totally from the strange contradiction of diasporic condition which rotates between originary home and imaginary location. She is a postcolonial subject, negotiating the uncertain and unstable boundaries.

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.' (Bhabha 303) 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.

She prefers showing them acquiring the power in order to control their fates and neutralize the forces that split her presence. Not a single character can be defined traditionally, because each has a dimensional facet to its personality and each is endowed with some paranoid fantasy to acquire the same *phantasmic space*. (Bhabha 63) Each character, caught in the tension of demand and desire, represents different characteristics of feminism and displacement. The necessity is that one has to step out of the rigid confines of conventional rules and adapt to new environment. The imbalance in personality takes place if one rigidly refuses to walk with changing times while still retaining one's fragile values and tradition in a massive role reversal. According to Lal:

On the subject of threshold, Bharati Mukherjee presents a timely example of how far the Indian Woman's periphery may be extended beyond the home. The outsider/insider dichotomy, the obvious stance in early writing by women, mutated subsequently by metaphoric indeterminacies in the fiction of the 1970s, has now arrived at a statement on negotiable boundaries. Mukherjee's heroines have pushed out the domestic barrier of home/ not home to reach beyond the geographical limits of the country itself. Breaking out of the traditional roles converging upon the known and the knowable in their inherited culture, the protagonists strain at all manner of controlling force. (Lal 53)

Thus, in Mukherjee, the heroines face uncertain interstices of personal history and take to violent acts and encounter the *transgressive and transitional truth* (Lal 57) and tend to become violent as to kill their husband or by other means. This frustration seems to have its seeds in the author herself as she mentioned it in *Days and Nights in Calcutta*. The frustrations come out loud and clear at her own helplessness in understanding the old society she had left and the eccentricities of the New World which did not embrace her:

And sometimes in the flickering darkness and heat of our guest room during power cuts, propelled by the same misplaced bitterness, I quarreled with Clark, accusing him of having forced expatriation on me. Could he live out his life in Calcutta where he would have to learn a new language a new way of making friends, where he could not expect his readers to understand too well intents of his fiction? (Blaise and Mukherjee 221)

In her novels Bharati Mukherjee has consciously created a cultural myth that is rooted in a multi-dimensional projection of the history and culture of the countries to which such women belong. About geographical boundaries and margins Said's point of view is important:

The geographic boundaries accompany the social ethnic, and cultural ones in expected ways. Yet often the sense in which someone feels himself to be not-foreign is based on a very unrigorous idea of what is "out there," beyond one's own territory. All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own. [...] Yet there is no use in pretending that all we know about time and space, or rather history and geography, is more than anything else imaginative. There are such things as positive history and positive geography which in Europe and the United States have impressive achievements to point to. (Said, *Orientalism* 54-55)

Mukherjee's works inhabit and occupy the liminal spaces of the nation where the most creative interaction take 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.' (Rushdie 533) It creates a new space and a new location of culture that allows disparity without an assumed or compulsory chain of command.

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